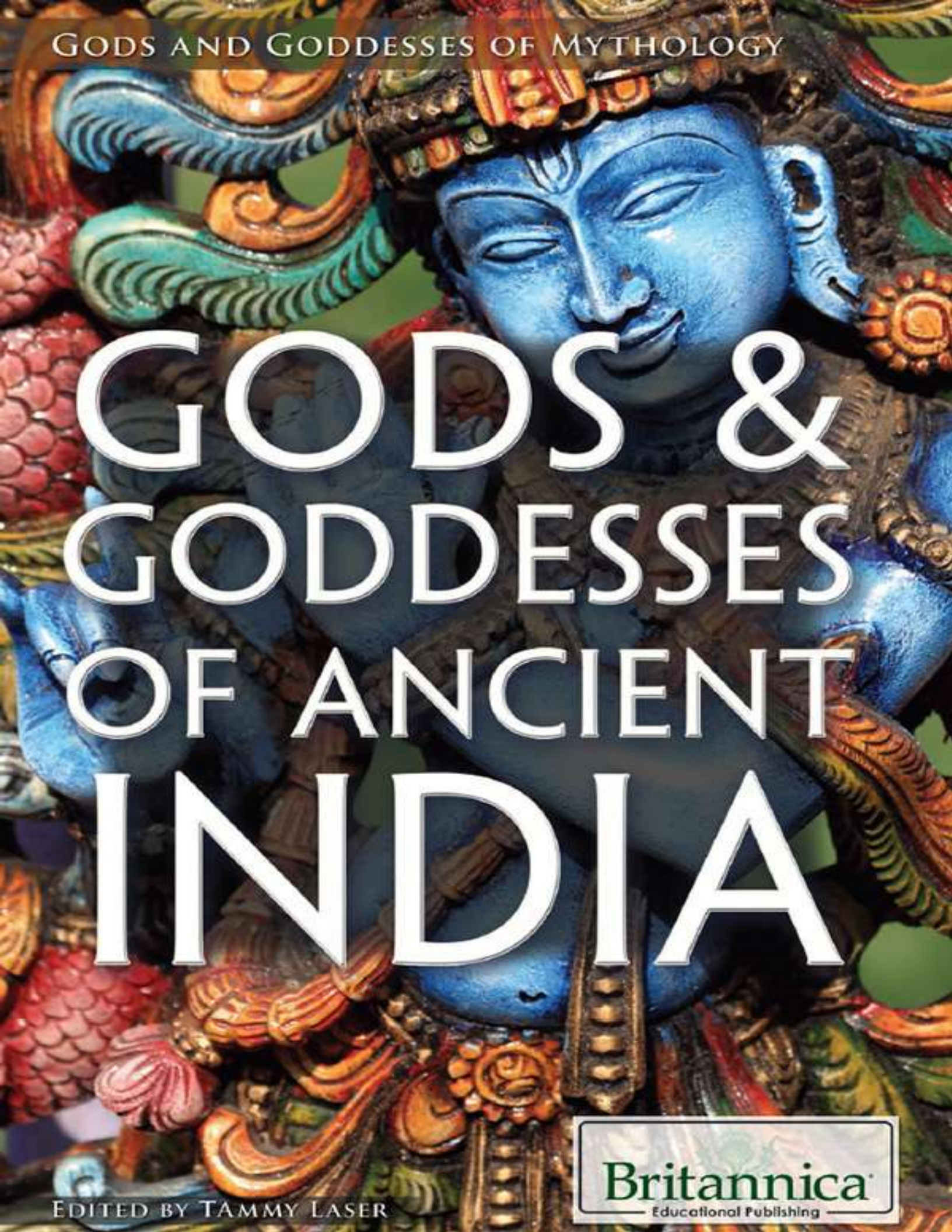
GODS AND GODDESSES OF MYTHOLOGY
GODS & GODDESSES OF ANCIENT INDIA
EDITED BY TAMMY LASER
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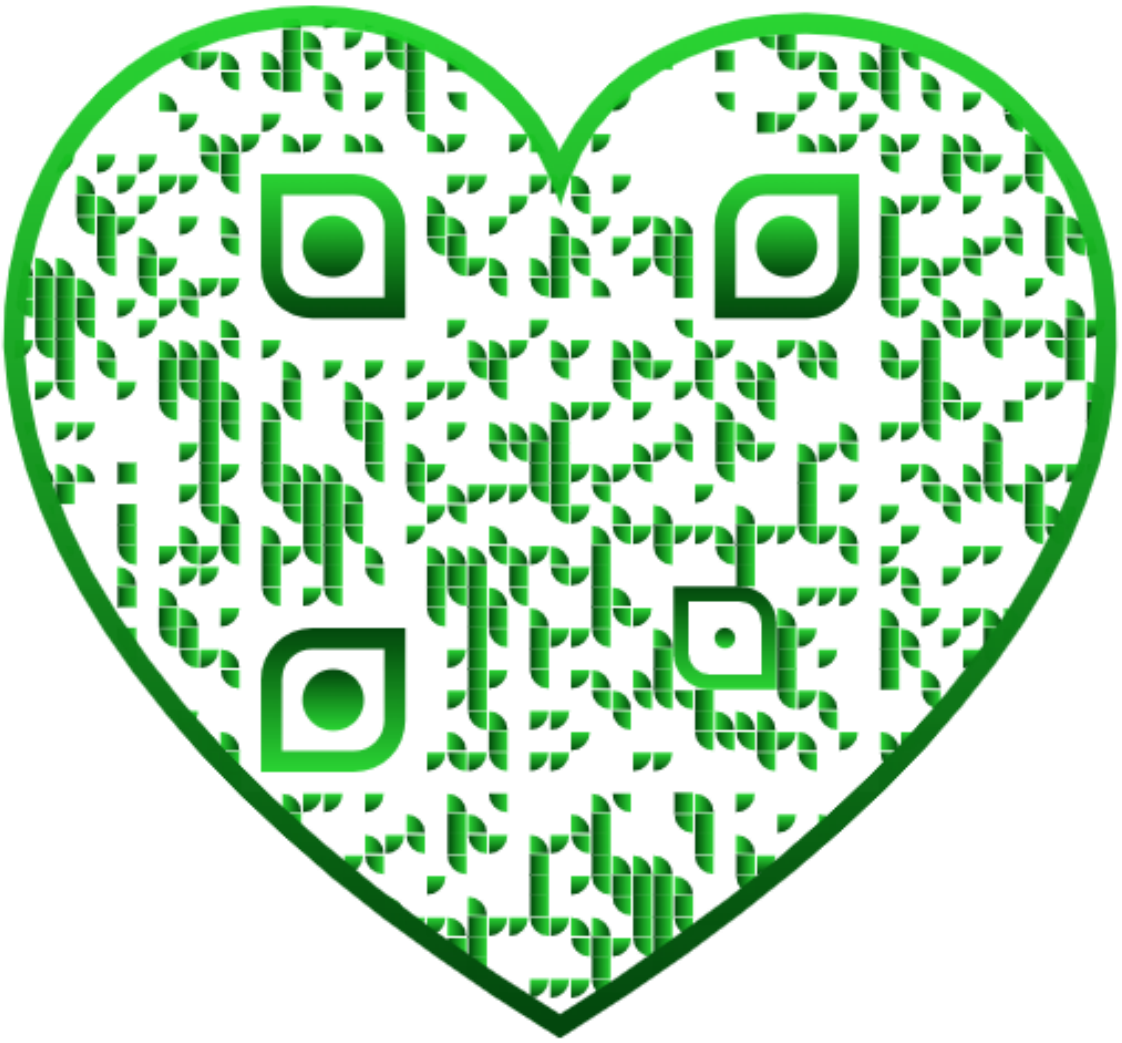

GODS & GODDESSES OF ANCIENT INDIA

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INTRODUCTION

This statue represents the god Brahma. Many representations of Brahma show him having four heads. He is credited with creating the human race. Godong/Universal Images Group/Getty Images

According to the epic *Mahabharata*, there are 33,333 Hindu deities. In other sources that number is multiplied a thousandfold. Usually, however, the gods are referred to as "the Thirty-Three."

The tendency toward pantheism increased in Puranic Hinduism and led to a kind of theism that exalted several supreme gods who were not prominently represented in the Vedic corpus, while many of the Vedic gods disappeared or were greatly diminished in stature. New patterns became apparent: the notion of *rita*, the basis of the conception of cosmic order, was reshaped into that of *dharma*, or the religious-social tasks and obligations of humans in society that maintain order in the universe. There also was a broader vision of the universe and the place of divinity.

Important myths about the gods are tied to the two principal moments in the life of the cosmos: creation and destruction. Traditionally, Brahma is the creator, from whom the universe and the four Vedas emerge. The conception of time as almost endlessly repeating itself in *kalpas* detracts, however, from the uniqueness of the first creation, and Brahma becomes little more than a demiurge.

Far more attention is given to the destruction of the universe. Shiva, partly established as the agent of destruction, is in some respects a remote god; from the viewpoint of his devotees, however, he is very accessible. He represents untamed wildness; he is the lone hunter and dancer, the yogi (the accomplished practitioner of Yoga) withdrawn from society, and the ash-covered ascetic. The distinction represented by the gods is not that between good and evil but rather that between the two ways in which the divine manifests itself in this world—as both benevolent and fearful, both harmonious and disharmonious, and both transcendent and immanent.

South Indian devotionalism produced many works in Sanskrit that contributed greatly to Hindu myth; among them are several Puranas that have exerted influence on Hinduism and are in turn reflections of trends in Hinduism. The *Bhagavata-purana* ("The Purana of the Devotees of the Lord [Vishnu]") was written in south India, probably in the first few centuries of the Common Era. It differs from the other Puranas in that it was planned as a unit and far greater care was taken with both metre and style. Its nearly 18,000 stanzas are divided into 12 books. The most popular part of the *Bhagavata-purana* is the description of the life of Krishna. Much emphasis is placed on the youth of Krishna: the threats against his life by the tyrant Kamsa, his flight and life among the cowherds at Gokula, and especially his adventures and pranks with the cowherd girls. The popularity of the text has led to the survival of many manuscripts, some beautifully illustrated. Much of medieval

Indian painting and vernacular literature draws upon the *Bhagavata-purana* for its themes.

CHAPTER 1

THE HISTORY OF HINDUISM

The history of Hinduism in India can be traced to about 1500 BCE. Evidence of Hinduism's early antecedents is derived from archaeology, comparative philology, and comparative religion.

The earliest literary source for the history of Hinduism is the *Rigveda*, consisting of hymns that were composed chiefly during the last two or three centuries of the 2nd millennium BCE. The religious life reflected in this text is not that of contemporary Hinduism but of an earlier sacrificial religious system, referred to by scholars as Brahmanism or Vedism, which developed in India among Indo-European-speaking peoples. Scholars from the period of British colonial rule postulated that this branch of a related group of nomadic and seminomadic tribal peoples, originally inhabiting the steppe country of southern Russia and Central Asia, brought with them the horse and chariot and the Sanskrit language. These scholars further averred that other branches of these peoples penetrated into Europe, bringing with them the Indo-European languages that developed into the chief language groups now spoken there. These theories have been disputed, however, and the historical homeland of the Indo-Europeans continues to be a matter of academic and political controversy.

The Vedic people were in close contact with the ancestors of the Iranians, as evidenced by similarities between Sanskrit and the earliest surviving Iranian languages. Thus, the religion of the *Rigveda* contains elements from three strata: an element common to most of the Indo-European groups, an element held in common with the early Iranians, and an element appearing only in the Indian subcontinent. Hinduism arose from multiple sources and from the geniuses of individual reformers in all periods.

This Hindu shrine in Bangkok, called Erawan Shrine, celebrates the god Brahma, or Phra

Phrom as he is known in Thailand. John S. Lander/LightRocket/Getty Images

Present-day Hinduism contains few direct survivals from its Indo-European heritage. Some of the elements of the Hindu wedding ceremony, notably the circumambulation of the sacred fire and the cult of the domestic fire itself, are rooted in the remote Indo-European past. The same is probably true of some aspects of the ancestor cult. The *Rigveda* contains many other Indo-European elements, such as ritual sacrifices and the worship of male sky gods, including the old sky god Dyaus, whose name is cognate with those of Zeus of ancient Greece and Jupiter of Rome ("Father Jove"). The Vedic heaven, the "world of the fathers," resembles the Germanic Valhalla and seems also to be an Indo-European inheritance.

The Indo-Iranian element in later Hinduism is chiefly found in the ceremony of initiation, or "second birth" (*upanayana*), a rite also found in Zoroastrianism. Performed by boys of the three "twice-born" upper classes, it involves the tying of a sacred cord. Another example of the common Indo-Iranian heritage is the Vedic god Varuna. Although now an unimportant sea god, Varuna, as portrayed in the *Rigveda*, possesses many features of the Zoroastrian Ahura Mazdā ("Wise Lord"). A third example can be seen in the sacred drink *soma*, which corresponds to the sacred *haoma* of Zoroastrianism.

Even in the earlier parts of the *Rigveda*, however, the religion displays numerous Indian features that are not evident in Indo-Iranian traditions. Some of the chief gods, for example, have no clear Indo-European or Indo-Iranian counterparts. Although some of these features may have evolved entirely within the Vedic framework, it is generally presumed that many of them stem from the influence of inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent who had no connection with Indo-European peoples. For example, some scholars attribute non-Vedic features of Hinduism to a people who are often vaguely and incorrectly called "Dravidian," a term that refers to a family of languages and not an ethnic group. Some scholars have further argued that the ruling classes of the Indus civilization, also called the Harappa culture (*c.* 2500–1700 BCE), spoke a Dravidian language and have tentatively identified their script with that of a Dravidian language. But there is little supporting evidence for this claim, and the presence of Dravidian speakers throughout the whole subcontinent at any time in history is not attested.

THE PROCESS OF SANSKRITIZATION

The development of Hinduism can be interpreted as a constant interaction between the religion of the upper social groups, represented by the Brahmans, and the

religion of other groups. From the time of the Vedas (*c.* 1500 BCE), people from many strata of society throughout the subcontinent tended to adapt their religious and social life to Brahmanic norms. This development resulted from the desire of lower-class groups to rise on the social ladder by adopting the ways and beliefs of the higher castes. Further, many local deities were identified with the gods and goddesses of the Puranas.

The process, sometimes called Sanskritization, began in Vedic times and was probably the principal method by which the Hinduism of the Sanskrit texts spread through the subcontinent and into Southeast Asia. Sanskritization still continues in the form of the conversion of tribal groups, and it is reflected in the persistence of the tendency among some Hindus to identify rural and local deities with the gods of the Sanskrit texts. Sanskritization also refers to the process by which some Hindus try to raise their status by adopting high-caste customs, such as wearing the sacred cord and becoming vegetarians.

If Sanskritization has been the main means of connecting the various local traditions throughout the subcontinent, the converse process, which has no convenient label, has been one of the means whereby Hinduism has changed and developed over the centuries. Many features of Hindu mythology and several popular gods—such as Ganesha, an elephant-headed god, and Hanuman, the monkey god—were incorporated into Hinduism and assimilated into the appropriate Vedic gods by this means. Similarly, the worship of many goddesses who are now regarded as the consorts of the great male Hindu gods, as well as the worship of individual unmarried goddesses, may have arisen from the worship of non-Vedic local goddesses. Thus, the history of Hinduism can be interpreted as the interplay between orthoprax custom and the practices of wider ranges of people and, complementarily, as the survival of features of local traditions that gained strength steadily until they were adapted by the Brahmans.

The Shaiva sects also developed from the 10th century onward. In south India there emerged the school of Shaiva-siddhanta, still one of the most significant religious forces in that region and one that, unlike the school of Shankara, does not accept the full identity of the soul and God. A completely monistic school of Shaivism appeared in Kashmir in the early 9th century. Its doctrines differ from those of Shankara chiefly because it attributes personality to the absolute spirit, who is the god Shiva and not the impersonal brahman.

CHAPTER 2 INDIVIDUAL GOD WORSHIP

Vaishnavism is the worship and acceptance of Vishnu (Sanskrit: “The Pervader” or “The Immanent”) or one of his various incarnations as the supreme manifestation of the divine. During a long and complex development, many Vaishnava groups emerged with differing beliefs and aims. Some of the major Vaishnava groups include the Shrivaishnavas (also known as Vishishtadvaitins) and Madhvas (also known as Dvaitins) of South India; the followers of the teachings of Vallabha in western India; and several Vaishnava groups in Bengal in eastern India, who follow teachings derived from those of the saint Chaitanya. Most Vaishnava believers, however, draw from various traditions and blend worship of Vishnu with local practices.

In the Vedas and Brahmanas, Vishnu is the god of far-extending motion and pervasiveness who, for humans in distress, penetrates and traverses the entire cosmos to make their existence possible. All beings are said to dwell in his three strides or footsteps (*trivikrama*): his highest step, or abode, is beyond mortal ken in the realm of heaven. Vishnu is also the god of the pillar of the universe and is identified with the sacrifice. He imparts his all-pervading power to the sacrificer who imitates his strides and identifies himself with the god, thus conquering the universe and attaining “the goal, the safe foundation, the highest light” (Shatapatha Brahmana).

In the centuries before the Common Era, Vishnu became the Ishvara (supreme deity) of his worshippers, fusing with the Purusha-Prajapati figure; with Narayana, worship of whom discloses a prominent influence of ascetics; with Krishna, whom the *Bhagavadgita* identified with Vishnu in many forms; and with Vasudeva, who was worshipped by a group known as the Pancharatras.

The extensive mythology attached to Vishnu is largely that of his avatars or incarnations. Although this notion is found elsewhere in Hinduism, it is basic to Vaishnavism. Each of his incarnations, especially Krishna and Rama, has a particular mythology and is the object of devotional religion (*bhakti*). The classical number of these incarnations is 10—the *dashavatara* (“ten avatars”)—ascending from theriomorphic (animal form) to fully anthropomorphic manifestations. They are Fish (Matsya), Tortoise (Kurma), Boar (Varaha), Man-Lion (Narasimha), Dwarf (Vamana), Rama-with-the-Ax (Parashurama), King Rama, Krishna, Buddha, and the future incarnation, Kalkin. This list varies, however, according to the text within which it appears and the devotional community that maintains it. For example, some

dashavatara lists include Balarama, the brother of Krishna, instead of the Buddha. Moreover, the number of incarnations is not fixed across all texts or traditions; some texts list 24 incarnations of Vishnu. In addition, a particular *dashavatara* list popularized by the 13th-century poet Jayadeva in his song *Gita Govinda* names Krishna, not Vishnu, as the supreme deity who incarnates himself 10 times. In Jayadeva's list the first seven incarnations are the same as those found in other Vaishnava lists. Jayadeva then lists Balarama and Buddha as the eighth and ninth incarnations. One common element in all these lists is Kalkin, who is always the final incarnation.

Statues of the three great Hindu gods—Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva—at the Halebidu Temple in Karnataka, India. The carvings date back to the 12th century. Amut Basu Photography/Flickr/Getty Images

Like most other Hindu gods, Vishnu has his especial entourage: his wife is Lakshmi, or Shri, the lotus goddess—granter of success, wealth, and liberation—

who came forth from the ocean when gods and demons churned it in order to recover from its depths the ambrosia or elixir of immortality, *amrita*. At the beginning of the commercial year, special worship is paid to her for success in personal affairs. Vishnu's mount is the bird Garuda, archenemy of snakes, and in his four hands are his emblems: the lotus, conch shell, and his two weapons, the club and the discus.

Devotees hold that, in addition to having many avatars, Vishnu also manifests himself in many temples. He may manifest himself within an iconic form (*archa avatara*) for worship. In many South Indian temples, the regional manifestations of Vishnu have distinct identities and are known by local names (e.g., as Venkateswara in Tirumala-Tirupati and in the Hindu diaspora). Each of these distinct forms has specific attributes and weapons, which are depicted in particular locations or poses. Elaborate treatises on iconography as well as on local custom and practice govern the carving and interpretation of these icons. In many temples in South India and Southeast Asia, Vishnu is depicted as standing, sitting, striding the universe, or reclining. He sometimes reclines on the serpent Ananta ("Without End," suggesting the deity's mastery over infinite time). He is frequently displayed in temple carvings and in calendar art with four arms (though occasional depictions provide him with as many as eight), three of which hold his conch shell, discus, and club. Although a few Vaishnava philosophical schools may consider the image in the temple to be a symbol pointing to the supreme being, most devotees perceive it as an actual manifestation of the deity, a form that he takes to make himself accessible to human beings.

Whatever justification the different Vaishnava groups (such as the Shrivaishnavas of South India or the worshippers of Vishnu Vithoba in Maharashtra) offer for their philosophical position, all of them believe in God as a person with distinctive qualities and worship him through his manifestations and representations. Many schools teach that it is through divine grace that the votary is lifted from transmigration to release. Much of Vaishnava faith is monotheistic, whether the object of adoration be Vishnu Narayana or one of his avatars. Preference for any one of these manifestations is largely a matter of tradition. Thus, most South Indian Shrivaishnavas worship Vishnu in one of his many local manifestations; the North Indian groups prefer Krishna.

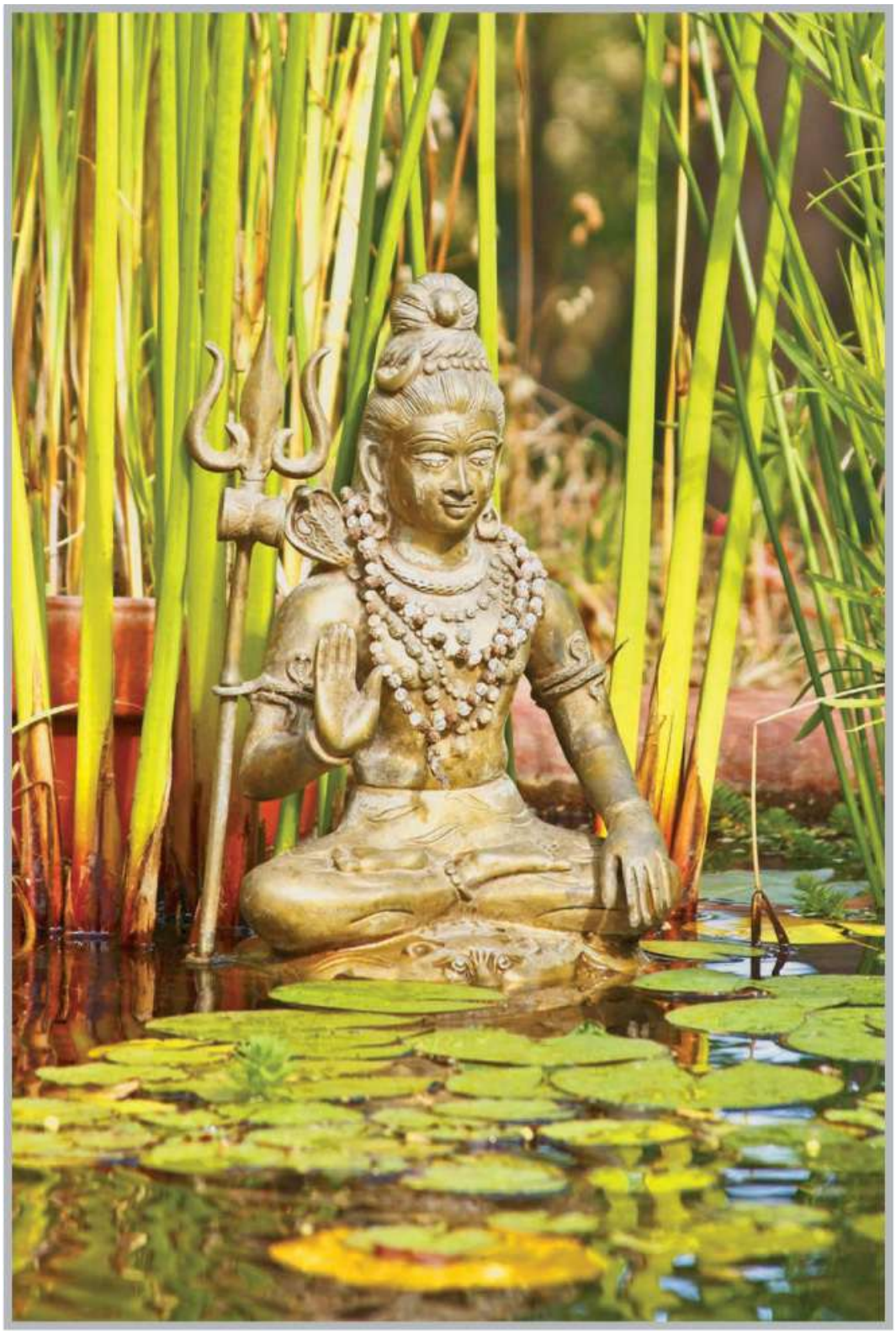
SHAIVISM

The character and position of the Vedic god Rudra—called Shiva, "the Auspicious One," when this aspect of his ambivalent nature is emphasized—remain clearly evident in some of the important features of the great god Shiva, who together with

Vishnu came to dominate Hinduism. Major groups such as the Lingayats of southern India and the Kashmiri Shaivas contributed the theological principles of Shaivism, and Shaiva worship became a complex amalgam of pan-Indian Shaiva philosophy and local or folk worship.

In the minds of the ancient Hindus, Shiva was the divine representative of the uncultivated, dangerous, and unpredictable aspects of nature. Shiva's character lent itself to being split into partial manifestations—each said to represent only an aspect of him—as well as to assimilating powers from other deities. Already in the *Rigveda*, appeals to him for help in case of disaster—of which he might be the originator—were combined with the confirmation of his great power. In the course of the Vedic period, Shiva—originally a ritual and conceptual outsider, yet a mighty god whose benevolent aspects were readily emphasized—gradually gained access to the circle of prominent gods who preside over various spheres of human interest. Many characteristics of the Vedic Prajapati, the creator; of Indra, the god of rain and of the thunderbolt; and of Agni, the Vedic god of fire, have been integrated into the figure of Shiva.

In those circles that produced the Shvetashvatara Upanishad (*c.* 400 BCE), Shiva rose to the highest rank. Its author proposed a way of escape from *samsara*, proclaiming Shiva the sole eternal Lord. Rudra-Shiva developed into an ambivalent and many-sided lord and master. His many manifestations, however, were active among humankind: as Pashupati ("Lord of Cattle"), he took over the fetters of the Vedic Varuna; as Aghora ("To Whom Nothing Is Horrible"), he showed the uncanny traits of his nature (evil, death, punishment) and also their opposites.



Statue of the Hindu god Shiva. Shiva is considered the supreme god by Shaivas and is often called Shiva the Destroyer. Gerard van Hemeren/Shutterstock.com

Like Vishnu, Shiva is held by devotees to be the entire universe, yet he is worshipped in various manifestations and in hundreds of local temples. Although it is not always clear whether Shiva is invoked as a great god of frightful aspect, capable of conquering demonic power, or as the boon-giving lord and protector, Hindus continue to invoke him in magical rites.

Shiva reconciles in his person semantically opposite though complementary aspects: he is both terrifying and mild, destroyer and restorer, eternal rest and ceaseless activity. These seeming contradictions make him a paradoxical figure, transcending humanity and assuming a mysterious sublimity of his own. From the standpoint of his devotees, his character is so complicated and his interests are so widely divergent as to seem incomprehensible. Yet, although Brahman philosophers like to emphasize his ascetic aspects and the ritualists of the Tantric tradition his sexuality, the seemingly opposite strands of his nature are generally accepted as two sides of one character.

Shiva temporarily interrupts his austerity and asceticism (*tapas*) to marry Parvati, and he combines the roles of lover and ascetic to such a degree that his wife must be an ascetic (yogi) when he devotes himself to austerities and a loving companion when he is in his erotic mode. This dual character finds its explanation in the ancient belief that, by his very chastity, an ascetic accumulates (sexual) power that can be discharged suddenly and completely, resulting in the fecundation of the soil. Various mythical tales reveal that both chastity and the loss of chastity are necessary for fertility and the intermittent process of regeneration in nature. The erotic and creative experiences portrayed in these narratives are a familiar feature in Hinduism, and they counterbalance the Hindu bent for asceticism. Such sexuality, while rather idyllic in Krishna, assumes a mystical aspect in Shiva, which is why the devotee can see in him the realization of the possibilities of both the ascetic life and the householder state. His marriage with Parvati is then a model of conjugal love, the divine prototype of human marriage, sanctifying the forces that carry on the human race.

Shiva’s many poses express various aspects of his nature. The cosmic dancer, he is the originator of the eternal rhythm of the universe, dancing through its creation and destruction. He also catches, in his thickly matted hair, the waters of the heavenly Ganges River, which destroy all sin. He wears in his headdress the crescent moon, which drips the nectar of everlasting life.

Shiva is the master of both *tandava*, the fierce, violent dance that gives rise to energy, and *lasya*, the gentle, lyric dance representing tenderness and grace. Holding a drum upon which he beats the rhythm of creation, he dances within a circle of flames that depicts the arc of dissolution. He holds up the palm of one hand in a

gesture of protection; with another he points to his foot to indicate the refuge of his followers. The image of the dancing Shiva is said by Shaivites to portray five cosmic activities: creation, maintenance, destruction, concealing his true form from adversaries, and, finally, the grace through which he saves his devotees. The outer form of the dance, however, is only one aspect of the divine flow of energy; followers of Shiva say that the dance is in the heart of every devotee.

Yet while the dancing Shiva is an important and popular representation, the abstract form of Shiva is perhaps the most commonly seen portrayal throughout India. Shiva is depicted as a conical shaft (*lingam*) of fire within a womb (*yoni*), illustrating the creative powers of Shiva and Parvati. In temples the *lingam*, which literally means "distinguishing symbol," is an upright structure that is often made of stone. It is placed in a stone *yoni* that represents both the womb and the abode of all creation. The union between the *lingam* and the *yoni* serves as a reminder that male and female forces are united in generating the universe.

Shiva also represents the unpredictability of divinity. He is the hunter who slays and skins his prey and dances a wild dance while covered with its hide. Far from society and the ordered world, he sits on the inaccessible Himalayan plateau of Mount Kailasa, an austere ascetic, averse to love, who burns Kama, the god of love, to ashes with a glance from the third eye—the eye of insight beyond duality—in the middle of his forehead. And at the end of the eon, he will dance the universe to destruction. He is nevertheless invoked as Shiva, Shambhu, Shankara ("Benignant" and "Beneficent"), for the god that can strike down can also spare. Snakes seek his company and twine themselves around his body. He wears a necklace of skulls. He sits in meditation, with his hair braided like a hermit's, his body smeared white with ashes. These ashes recall the burning pyres on which the *sannyasis* (renouncers) take leave of the social order of the world and set out on a lonely course toward release, carrying with them a human skull.

Shiva's consort is Parvati ("Daughter of the Mountain [Himalaya]"), a goddess who is an auspicious and powerful wife. She is also personified as the Goddess (Devi), Mother (Amba), black and destructive (Kali), fierce (Chandika), and inaccessible (Durga). As Shiva's female counterpart, she inherits some of Shiva's more fearful aspects. She comes to be regarded as the power (*shakti*) of Shiva, without which Shiva is helpless. Shakti is in turn personified in the form of many different goddesses, often said to be aspects of her.

CHAPTER 3

ORIGINS AND WRITINGS OF HINDUISM

The term “Hinduism” became familiar as a designator of religious ideas and practices distinctive to India with the publication of books such as *Hinduism* (1877) by Sir Monier Monier-Williams, the notable Oxford scholar and author of an influential Sanskrit dictionary. Initially it was an outsiders’ term, building on centuries-old usages of the word “Hindu.” Early travelers to the Indus Valley, beginning with the Greeks and Persians, spoke of its inhabitants as “Hindu” (Greek: ‘*indoi*), and, in the 16th century, residents of India themselves began very slowly to employ the term to distinguish themselves from the Turks. Gradually the distinction became primarily religious rather than ethnic, geographic, or cultural.

Since the late 19th century, Hindus have reacted to the term “Hinduism” in several ways. Some have rejected it in favor of indigenous formulations. Others have preferred “Vedic religion,” using the term “Vedic” to refer not only to the ancient religious texts known as the Vedas but also to a fluid corpus of sacred works in multiple languages and an orthoprax (traditionally sanctioned) way of life. Still others have chosen to call the religion *sanatana dharma* (“eternal law”), a formulation made popular in the 19th century and emphasizing the timeless elements of the tradition that are perceived to transcend local interpretations and practice. Finally, others, perhaps the majority, have simply accepted the term “Hinduism” or its analogues, especially *hindu dharma* (Hindu moral and religious law), in various Indic languages.

The Cōḻīśvara temple at Kīḻaiyūr, in Southern India was built in the late 9th century. P. Chandra

Since the early 20th century, textbooks on Hinduism have been written by Hindus themselves, often under the rubric of *sanatana dharma*. These efforts at self-explanation add a new layer to an elaborate tradition of explaining practice and doctrine that dates to the 1st millennium BCE. The roots of Hinduism can be traced back much further—both textually, to the schools of commentary and debate preserved in epic and Vedic writings from the 2nd millennium BCE, and visually, through artistic representations of *yakshas* (luminous spirits associated with specific locales and natural phenomena) and *nagas* (cobralike divinities), which were worshipped from about 400 BCE. The roots of the tradition are also sometimes traced back to the female terra-cotta figurines found ubiquitously in excavations of sites associated with the Indus Valley civilization and sometimes interpreted as

goddesses.

General Nature of Hinduism

More strikingly than any other major religious community, Hindus accept—and indeed celebrate—the organic, multileveled, and sometimes pluralistic nature of their traditions. This expansiveness is made possible by the widely shared Hindu view that truth or reality cannot be encapsulated in any creedal formulation, a perspective expressed in the Hindu prayer “May good thoughts come to us from all sides.” Thus, Hinduism maintains that truth must be sought in multiple sources, not dogmatically proclaimed.

Anyone’s view of the truth—even that of a guru regarded as possessing superior authority—is fundamentally conditioned by the specifics of time, age, gender, state of consciousness, social and geographic location, and stage of attainment. These multiple perspectives enhance a broad view of religious truth rather than diminish it; hence, there is a strong tendency for contemporary Hindus to affirm that tolerance is the foremost religious virtue. On the other hand, even cosmopolitan Hindus living in a global environment recognize and value the fact that their religion has developed in the specific context of the Indian subcontinent. Such a tension between universalist and particularist impulses has long animated the Hindu tradition. When Hindus speak of their religious identity as *sanatana dharma*, they emphasize its continuous, seemingly eternal (*sanatana*) existence and the fact that it describes a web of customs, obligations, traditions, and ideals (*dharma*) that far exceeds the Western tendency to think of religion primarily as a system of beliefs. A common way in which English-speaking Hindus often distance themselves from that frame of mind is to insist that Hinduism is not a religion but a way of life.

Religious Texts

For members of the upper castes, a principal characteristic of Hinduism has traditionally been a recognition of the Veda, the most ancient body of Indian religious literature, as an absolute authority revealing fundamental and unassailable truth. The Veda is also regarded as the basis of all the later *shastra* texts, which stress the religious merits of the Brahmans—including, for example, the medical corpus known as the *Ayurveda*. Parts of the Veda are quoted in essential Hindu rituals (such as the wedding ceremony), and it is the source of many enduring patterns of Hindu thought, yet its contents are practically unknown to most Hindus. Most Hindus venerate it from a distance. In the past, groups who rejected its

authority outright (such as Buddhists and Jains) were regarded by Hindus as heterodox, but now they are often considered to be part of a larger family of common Indic traditions.

Another characteristic of much Hindu thought is its special regard for Brahmans as a priestly class possessing spiritual supremacy by birth. As special manifestations of religious power and as bearers and teachers of the Veda, Brahmans have often been thought to represent an ideal of ritual purity and social prestige. Yet this has also been challenged, either by competing claims to religious authority—especially from kings and other rulers—or by the view that Brahmanhood is a status attained by depth of learning, not birth. Evidence of both these challenges can be found in Vedic literature itself, especially the Upanishads (speculative religious texts that provide commentary on the Vedas), and *bhakti* literature is full of vignettes in which the small-mindedness of Brahmans is contrasted with true depth of religious experience, as exemplified by poet-saints such as Kabir and Ravidas.

DOCTRINE OF *ATMAN*-*BRAHMAN*

Most Hindus believe in *brahman*, an uncreated, eternal, infinite, transcendent, and all-embracing principle. *Brahman* contains in itself both being and nonbeing, and it is the sole reality—the ultimate cause, foundation, source, and goal of all existence. As the All, *brahman* either causes the universe and all beings to emanate from itself, transforms itself into the universe, or assumes the appearance of the universe. *Brahman* is in all things and is the self (*atman*) of all living beings. *Brahman* is the creator, preserver, or transformer and reabsorber of everything. Hindus differ, however, as to whether this ultimate reality is best conceived as lacking attributes and qualities—the impersonal *brahman*—or as a personal God, especially Vishnu, Shiva, or Shakti (these being the preferences of adherents called Vaishnavas, Shaivas, and Shaktas, respectively). Belief in the importance of the search for a One that is the All has been a characteristic feature of India’s spiritual life for more than 3,000 years.

KARMA, *SAMSARA*, AND *MOKSHA*

Hindus generally accept the doctrine of transmigration and rebirth and the complementary belief in karma. The whole process of rebirth, called *samsara*, is cyclic, with no clear beginning or end, and encompasses lives of perpetual, serial attachments. Actions generated by desire and appetite bind one’s spirit (*jiva*) to an endless series of births and deaths. Desire motivates any social interaction

(particularly when involving sex or food), resulting in the mutual exchange of good and bad karma. In one prevalent view, the very meaning of salvation is emancipation (*moksha*) from this morass, an escape from the impermanence that is an inherent feature of mundane existence. In this view the only goal is the one permanent and eternal principle: the One, God, brahman, which is totally opposite to phenomenal existence. People who have not fully realized that their being is identical with brahman are thus seen as deluded. Fortunately, the very structure of human experience teaches the ultimate identity between *brahman* and *atman*. One may learn this lesson by different means: by realizing one's essential sameness with all living beings, by responding in love to a personal expression of the divine, or by coming to appreciate that the competing attentions and moods of one's waking consciousness are grounded in a transcendental unity—one has a taste of this unity in the daily experience of deep, dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER 4

VISHNU AND THE AVATARS OF VISHNU

Vishnu, one of the principal Hindu deities, combines many lesser divine figures and local heroes, chiefly through his avatars, particularly Rama and Krishna. His appearances are innumerable; he is often said to have 10 avatars, but not always the same 10. Among the 1,000 names of Vishnu (repeated as an act of devotion by his worshippers) are Vasudeva, Narayana, and Hari.*

Vishnu was not a major deity in the Vedic period. A few Rigvedic hymns (*c.* 1400–1000 BCE) associate him with the sun, and one hymn relates the legend of his three strides across the universe, which formed the basis of the myth of his avatar Vamana, the dwarf. Legends of figures that later became other avatars, such as the fish that saves humankind from a great flood, are also found in the early literature. By the time of the *Mahabharata* (the great Sanskrit epic that appeared in its final form about 400 CE), the avatars began to be identified with Vishnu. Vishnu is said to manifest a portion of himself anytime he is needed to fight evil and to protect *dharma* (moral and religious law). Not all avatars are wholly benevolent; some, such as Parashurama and Krishna, bring about the death of many innocent people, and the Buddha corrupts the pious antigods. Vishnu's *vahana*, his vehicle in the world, is the bird Garuda; his heaven is called Vaikuntha.

Temple images of Vishnu depict him either sitting, often in the company of his consorts Lakshmi (also called Shri) and Bhumidevi (Earth), or reclining on the coils of the serpent Shesha—asleep on the cosmic ocean during the period between the periodic dissolution and re-manifestation of the world. He is also represented in a standing position and dressed in royal garments, holding in his four (sometimes two) hands the *shankha* (conch), *chakra* (discus), *gada* (club), or *padma* (lotus). On his chest is the curl of hair known as the *shrivatsa* mark, and around his neck he wears the auspicious jewel Kaustubha. In paintings, Vishnu is usually shown as dark-complexioned, a distinguishing feature also of several of his incarnations.

This wall painting is of the god Vishnu. He is considered the preserver and protector of the universe. Boris Stroujko/Shutterstock.com

MATSYA: THE FIRST AVATAR OF VISHNU

Matsya is the first of the 10 avatars (incarnations) of the Hindu god Vishnu. In this appearance Vishnu saved the world from a great flood. Manu, the first man, caught a little fish that grew to giant size and revealed himself as the god. When the flood approached, Manu saved himself by tying his boat to the horn on the fish's head. Some early accounts refer to the fish-savior as Prajapati (whose identity is later merged with that of Brahma), an illustration of how the legends of the avatars incorporate existing myths.

Matsya may be depicted either in animal form or in a combined human-animal form. In the latter case the man is shown as the upper half and the fish as the lower half. Matsya is generally represented with four hands—one holding the conch shell,

one holding the discus (*chakra*), one in the pose of conferring a boon (*varada-mudra*), and one in the protection-affording pose (*abhaya-mudra*). According to the canons of sculpture, the man-half should be shown as wearing all the ornaments usually associated with Vishnu.

Kūrma: The Second Avatar of Vishnu

Kūrma, (Sanskrit: “Tortoise”) is the second of the 10 avatars of the Hindu god Vishnu. In this incarnation Vishnu is associated with the myth of the churning of the cosmic ocean. The gods and the *asuras* cooperated in the churning to obtain the *amrita*, the elixir of immortality. The great serpent Vāsuki offered himself as a rope, and Mount Mandara was torn out for use as a churning stick. A firm foundation was required to steady the mountain, so Vishnu took the form of a tortoise and supported the churning stick on his back. An earlier reference to a divine incarnation as a tortoise identifies the animal with Prajapati (the god Brahma), who took that shape in order to create offspring.

The Kūrma avatar of Vishnu is usually represented in painting and sculpture in a mixed human-animal form. The human half, which is the upper half, is depicted wearing the same ornaments and holding the same weapons as in the usual images of Vishnu. Kūrma is also represented zoomorphically, as a tortoise.

Varaha: The Third Avatar of Vishnu

Varaha is the third of the 10 incarnations of the Hindu god Vishnu. When a demon named Hiranyaksha dragged the earth to the bottom of the sea, Vishnu took the form of a boar in order to rescue it. They fought for a thousand years. Then Varaha slew the demon and raised the earth out of the water with his tusks. The myth reflects an earlier creation legend of Prajapati (Brahma), who assumed the shape of a boar in order to lift the earth up out of the primeval waters.

In painting and sculpture, Varaha is represented either in full animal form or with the head of a boar and the body of a man. Completely zoomorphic sculptures show him as a colossal boar with the earth, personified as the dark-hued goddess Bhumidevi, clinging to one of his tusks. As half-human, half-animal, he is often shown standing with one leg bent supporting Bhumidevi, whose expression, according to Indian canons of representation, should express both shyness and joy.

This image depicts Varaha, the third avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu. He can be recognized because he has the head of a boar. Universal Images Group/Getty Images

NARASIMHA: THE FOURTH AVATAR OF VISHNU

Narasimha is the fourth of the 10 avatars of the Hindu god Vishnu. The demon Hiranyakashipu, twin brother of the demon overthrown by Vishnu in his previous incarnation as Varaha, obtained a boon from the god Brahma that he could not be killed by man or beast, from inside or outside, by day or by night, and that no weapon could harm him. Thus, feeling secure, he began to trouble heaven and earth. His son, Prahlada, on the other hand, was a devotee of Vishnu, even though his father threatened his life because of it. One day the demon challenged Prahlada and, kicking a stone pillar, asked: “If your god is omnipresent, is he in this pillar also?” Vishnu emerged from the pillar in the form of a man-lion and slew the demon at dusk on the threshold.

The incident is often depicted in art, with Narasimha appearing out of the pillar or engaged in ripping open the belly of the demon, one of his numerous pairs of hands

holding up the entrails like a garland. The animal aspect is shown by a curly mane of hair; sharp, curved teeth; and leonine facial features. The body, though human, has a thick neck, large shoulders, and slender abdomen and waist. Seated images of Narasimha are also found in which the lion face has a pacific expression.

Vāmana: The Fifth Avatar of Vishnu

Vāmana is the fifth of the 10 incarnations of the Hindu god Vishnu. He made his appearance when the demon king Bali ruled the entire universe and the gods had lost their power. One day the dwarf Vāmana visited the court of Bali and begged of him as much land as he could step over in three paces. The king laughingly granted the request. Assuming a gigantic form, Vāmana with one step covered the whole earth and with the second step the midworld between earth and heaven. As there was nowhere left to go, the demon king lowered his head and suggested Vāmana place his foot on it for the promised third step. Vāmana was pleased, and with the pressure of his foot sent Bali down below to rule the netherworld. Vishnu in this form is often identified as Trivikrama (God of the Three Strides).

The images of Vāmana usually show him already grown to giant size, one foot firmly planted on earth and the other lifted as if to take a stride. If shown small in stature the sculptures may depict him as a deformed dwarf, or as a *brahmachari* (monastic student), dressed in the deer skin, loin cloth, and sacred thread and with the tufted hair of the student.

Parashurama: The Sixth Avatar of Vishnu

Parashurama is the sixth of the 10 avatars of the Hindu god Vishnu. The *Mahabharata* (“Great Epic of the Bharata Dynasty”) and the Puranas (“Ancient Lore”) record that Parashurama was born to the Brahman sage Jamadagni in order to deliver the world from the arrogant oppression of the baron or warrior caste, the Kshatriyas. He killed all the male Kshatriyas on earth 21 successive times (each time their wives survived and gave birth to new generations) and filled five lakes with blood. Scholars view the legend as reflecting strife between the two classes of society in pre-Buddhist India. Parashurama is the traditional founder of Malabar and is said to have bestowed land there on members of the priestly caste whom he brought down from the north in order to expiate his slaughter of the Kshatriyas. He is sometimes said to have lived on earth during the lifetime of the seventh avatar, Rama, and to have expressed some jealousy of the younger incarnation.

RAMA: THE SEVENTH AVATAR OF VISHNU

Rama, one of the most widely worshipped Hindu deities, is the embodiment of chivalry and virtue. Although there are three Ramas mentioned in Indian tradition (Parashurama, Balarama, and Ramacandra), the name is specifically associated with Ramacandra, the seventh incarnation of Lord Vishnu. It is possible that Rama was an actual historical figure, a tribal hero of ancient India who was later deified. His story is told briefly in the *Mahabharata* ("Great Epic of the Bharata Dynasty") and at great length in the *Ramayana* ("Romance of Rama").

References to Rama as an incarnation of Vishnu appear in the early centuries CE; there was, however, probably no special worship of him before the 11th century, and it was not until the 14th and 15th centuries that distinct sects appeared venerating him as the supreme god (notably that of the followers of the Brahman Ramananda). Rama's popularity was increased greatly by the retelling of the Sanskrit epics in the vernaculars, such as Tulsidas's celebrated Hindi version, the *Ramcaritmanas* ("Sacred Lake of the Acts of Rama").

Rama and Krishna (also an incarnation of Vishnu) were the two most popular recipients of adoration from the *bhakti* (devotional) cults that swept the country during that time. Whereas Krishna is adored for his mischievous pranks and amorous dalliances, Rama is conceived as a model of reason, right action, and desirable virtues. Temples to Rama faced by shrines to his monkey devotee Hanuman are widespread throughout India. Rama's name is a popular form of greeting among friends ("Ram! Ram!"), and Rama is the deity most invoked at death.

In sculpture, Rama is represented as a standing figure, holding an arrow in his right hand and a bow in his left. His image in a shrine or temple is almost invariably attended by figures of his wife, Sita; his favorite half-brother, Lakshmana; and his monkey devotee, Hanuman. In painting, he is depicted dark in color (indicating his affinity with Lord Vishnu), with princely adornments and the *kirita-makuta* (tall conical cap) on his head indicating his royal status. Rama's exploits were depicted with great sympathy by the Rajasthani and Pahari schools of painting in the 17th and 18th centuries.

KRISHNA: THE EIGHTH AVATAR OF VISHNU

Krishna (Sanskrit Kṛṣṇa), is one of the most widely revered and most popular of all Indian divinities, worshipped as the eighth incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu and also as a supreme god in his own right. Krishna became the focus of numerous *bhakti* (devotional) cults, which over the centuries have produced a wealth of

religious poetry, music, and painting. The basic sources of Krishna's mythology are the epic *Mahabharata* and its 5th-century-CE appendix, the *Harivamsha*, and the Puranas, particularly Books 10 and 11 of the *Bhagavata-purana*. They relate how Krishna (literally "black," or "dark as a cloud") was born into the Yadava clan, the son of Vasudeva and Devaki, sister of Kamsa, the wicked king of Mathura (in modern Uttar Pradesh). Kamsa, hearing a prophecy that he should be destroyed by Devaki's child, tried to slay her children, but Krishna was smuggled across the Yamuna River to Gokula (or Vraja, modern Gokul), where he was raised by the leader of the cowherds, Nanda, and his wife Yashoda.

This Nepalese statue of Krishna is made of bronze and turquoise. Krishna is the eighth avatar of Vishnu. Scala/Art Resource, New York

The child Krishna was adored for his mischievous pranks; he also performed many miracles and slew demons. As a youth, the cowherd Krishna became renowned as a lover, the sound of his flute prompting the *gopis* (wives and

daughters of the cowherds) to leave their homes to dance ecstatically with him in the forests. His favorite among them was the beautiful Radha. At length Krishna and his brother Balarama returned to Mathura to slay the wicked Kamsa. Afterward, finding the kingdom unsafe, he led the Yadavas to the western coast of Kathiawar and established his court at Dvaraka (modern Dwarka, Gujarat). He married the princess Rukmini and took other wives as well.

Krishna refused to bear arms in the great war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas but offered a choice of his personal attendance to one side and the loan of his army to the other. The Pandavas chose the former, and Krishna thus served as charioteer for Arjuna. On his return to Dvaraka, a brawl broke out one day among the Yadava chiefs in which Krishna's brother and son were slain. As the god sat in the forest lamenting, a huntsman mistaking him for a deer shot him in his one vulnerable spot, the heel, killing him.

Krishna's personality is clearly a syncretic one, though the different elements are not easily separated. Vasudeva-Krishna, a Vrishni prince who was presumably also a religious leader, was elevated to the godhead by the 5th century BCE. The cowherd Krishna is obviously the god of a pastoral community that turned away from the Indra-dominated Vedic religion. The Krishna who emerged from the blending of these ideologies was ultimately identified with the supreme god Vishnu-Narayana and, hence, considered his avatar. His cult preserved distinctive traits, chief among them an exploration of the analogies between divine love and human love. Thus, Krishna's youthful dalliances with the *gopis* are interpreted as symbolic of the loving interplay between God and the human soul.

The rich variety of legends associated with Krishna's life led to an abundance of representation in painting and sculpture. The child Krishna (Balakrishna) is depicted crawling on his hands and knees or dancing with joy, a ball of butter held in his hands. The divine lover (the most common representation) is shown playing the flute, surrounded by adoring *gopis*. In 17th- and 18th-century Rajasthani and Pahari painting, Krishna is characteristically depicted with blue-black skin, wearing a yellow *dhoti* (loincloth) and a crown of peacock feathers.

BALARAMA: THE NINTH AVATAR OF VISHNU

Balarama, in Hindu mythology, is the elder half-brother of Krishna, with whom he shared many adventures. Sometimes Balarama is considered one of the 10 avatars of the god Vishnu, particularly among those members of Vaishnava sects who elevate Krishna to the rank of a principal god. Other legends identify him as the incarnation in human form of the serpent Shesha, and he may originally have been an agricultural deity. As early as the 2nd–1st century BCE he is depicted holding a

plowshare and a pestle with a snake canopy above his head and may be among the earliest Brahmanic gods to be given sculptural representation. In paintings he is always shown with fair skin, in contrast to Krishna's blue complexion. The stories associated with him emphasize his love of wine and his enormous strength. He was rarely worshipped independently.

KALKIN: THE TENTH AVATAR OF VISHNU

Kalkin, also called Kalki, is the final avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu, who is yet to appear. At the end of the present Kali age, when virtue and religion have disappeared and the world is ruled by unjust men, Kalkin will appear to destroy the wicked and to usher in a new age. He will, according to tradition, be seated on a white horse with a naked sword in his hand, blazing like a comet. He is less commonly represented in painting and sculpture than the other avatars of Vishnu and is shown either on horseback or accompanied by his horse. According to some legends of the end of the world, Kalkin's horse will stamp the earth with its right foot, causing the tortoise which supports the world to drop into the deep. Then the gods will restore the earth once again to its former purity.

GARUDA: THE BIRD OF VISHNU

Garuda, in Hindu mythology, is the bird and the *vahana* (mount) of the god Vishnu. In the *Rigveda* (a collection of Vedic hymns) the sun is compared to a bird in its flight across the sky, and the association of the kitelike Garuda with Vishnu is taken by scholars as another indication of Vishnu's early origins as a sun deity. The mythological account of Garuda's birth identifies him as the younger brother of Aruna, the charioteer of the sun god, Surya. His mother was held in slavery by her co-wife and her sons, who were *nagas* (serpents), to which is attributed the lasting enmity between the eaglelike kite and the serpents. The *nagas* agreed to release his mother if he could obtain for them a drink of the elixir of immortality, the *amrita*. Garuda performed this feat with a certain amount of difficulty and on his way back from the heavens met Vishnu and agreed to serve him as his vehicle and also as his emblem.

Garuda is described in one text as emerald in color, with the beak of a kite, roundish eyes, golden wings and four arms, and with breast, knees, and legs like those of the kite. He is also depicted anthropomorphically, with wings and hawklike features. Two of his hands are folded in adoration (*anjali-mudra*) and the other two carry an umbrella and the pot of *amrita*. Sometimes Vishnu rides on his shoulders.

Images of Garuda are used by devotees of Vishnu to designate their cult affiliations, in which guise they appeared on coins of the Gupta period.

Garuda traveled with the spread of Hinduism to Nepal and to Southeast Asia, where he is frequently depicted on monuments. He is also associated with royalty in several Southeast Asian countries.

ADITI

Aditi, in the Vedic phase of Hindu mythology, is the personification of the infinite and mother of a group of celestial deities, the Adityas. As a primeval goddess, she is referred to as the mother of many gods, including Vishnu in his dwarf incarnation and, in a later reappearance, Krishna. She supports the sky, sustains all existence, and nourishes the earth. It is in the latter sense that she is often represented as a cow.

Her sons, the Adityas, are of uncertain number and identity. Varuna is their chief, and they are called like him “upholders of divine order (*rita*).” One hymn names them as Varuna, Mitra, Aryaman, Daksha, Bhaga, and Amsha. Sometimes Daksha is excluded and Indra, Savitri (the sun), and Dhatri are added. Occasionally the term is extended to include all the gods. In later periods their number is increased to 12, and they are linked to the 12 solar months of the year. Aditya in the singular form is a name of the sun.

AGNI

Agni (Sanskrit: “Fire”) is fire-god of the Hindus, second only to Indra in the Vedic mythology of ancient India. He is equally the fire of the sun, of lightning, and of the hearth that men light for purposes of worship. As the divine personification of the fire of sacrifice, he is the mouth of the gods, the carrier of the oblation, and the messenger between the human and the divine orders. Agni is described in the scriptures as ruddy-hued and having two faces—one beneficent and one malignant. He has three or seven tongues, hair that stands on end like flames, three legs, and seven arms; he is accompanied by a ram. In the *Rigveda* he is sometimes identified with Rudra, the forerunner of the later god Śiva. Though Agni has no sect in modern Hinduism, his presence is invoked in many ceremonies, especially by Agnihotrī Brahmans, and he is the guardian of the southeast.

This textile, painted sometime in the 15th century, depicts Agni, the Hindu god of fire. In some renderings, Agni is shown with two faces. © Rubin Museum of Art /Art Resource, New York

ARDHANARISHVARA

Ardhanarishvara is the composite male-female figure of the Hindu god Shiva, together with his consort Parvati. As seen in many Indian and Southeast Asian sculptures, the right (male) half of the figure is adorned with the traditional ornaments of Shiva. Half of the hair is piled in a hairdress of matted locks, half of a third eye is visible on the forehead, a tiger skin covers the loins, and serpents are used as ornaments. The left (female) half shows hair well combed and knotted, half of a tilaka (a round dot) on the forehead, the eye outlined in black, a well-developed breast, a silk garment caught with girdles, an anklet, and the foot tinted red with henna.

The symbolic intent of the figure according to most authorities is to signify that the male and female principles are inseparable. A popular explanation, as given in a collection of legends known as the *Shiva-Purana*, is that the god Brahma created male beings and instructed them in turn to create others, but they were unable to do so. When Shiva appeared before him in an androgynous form, Brahma realized his omission and created females. Yet another legend has it that the sage (*rishi*) Bhringi had vowed to worship only one deity and so failed to circumambulate and to prostrate himself before Parvati. Parvati tried to force him to do so by asking to be united with her lord, but the sage assumed the form of a beetle and continued to circumambulate only the male half, whereupon Parvati became reconciled and blessed Bhringi.

This 6th-century stone carving is of Ardhanarishvara. Ardhanarishvara is an androgynous form: half man, half woman, split down the middle. Pramod Chandra

AYYAPPAN

Ayyappan, also called Sartavu, or Śāsta, in Hinduism, is a deity who is always and at all times celibate, generally depicted in a yogic posture, wearing a bell around his neck. His most prominent shrine is at Śabarimalai in the southern Indian state of Kerala, and he enjoys popularity mostly in Kerala, though the neighboring states of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka also house many Ayyappan temples. Ayyappan may bear a historical relationship to the tutelary deity Aiyanar of Tamil Nadu. The most public aspect of the worship of Ayyappan is the annual pilgrimage to Śabarimalai in which only men, pre-adolescent girls, and post-menopausal women are allowed to participate. Prior to the journey, pilgrims, who annually number around one million, are required to observe strict vows of celibacy and abstain from meat and intoxicants for a period of, traditionally, 41 days. Pilgrims climb barefoot to the hilltop where the shrine is located, and during the pilgrimage unity and brotherhood are emphasized, while linguistic and economic differences among participants are minimized, leading some to speculate that Buddhism influenced the worship of Ayyappan. A late Sanskrit text describes Ayyappan as the son of Shiva and Vishnu (with the latter in his form as the enchantress Mohini). Abandoned by his parents with but a bell around his neck, he was adopted by a Pantalam king of Kerala, and, soon after, his divinity was recognized and a shrine erected to him. Other tales and songs in Malayalam and Kodagu describe his adoption by a local king. They focus on his later life, in which he grew to be a renowned warrior who first set out to defeat and was subsequently worshipped by the Muslim chieftain Vavar (to whom there is a shrine en route to Śabarimalai).

The Hindu gods (left to right) *Ganesh, Ayyappan, and Skanda appear in this painted image.* Godong/Robert Harding World Imagery/Getty Images

BRAHMA

Brahma, one of the major gods of Hinduism from about 500 BCE to 500 CE, was gradually eclipsed by Vishnu, Shiva, and the great goddess (in her multiple aspects). Associated with the Vedic creator god Prajapati, whose identity he assumed, Brahma was born from a golden egg and created the earth and all things on it. Later myths describe him as having come forth from a lotus that issued from Vishnu's navel.

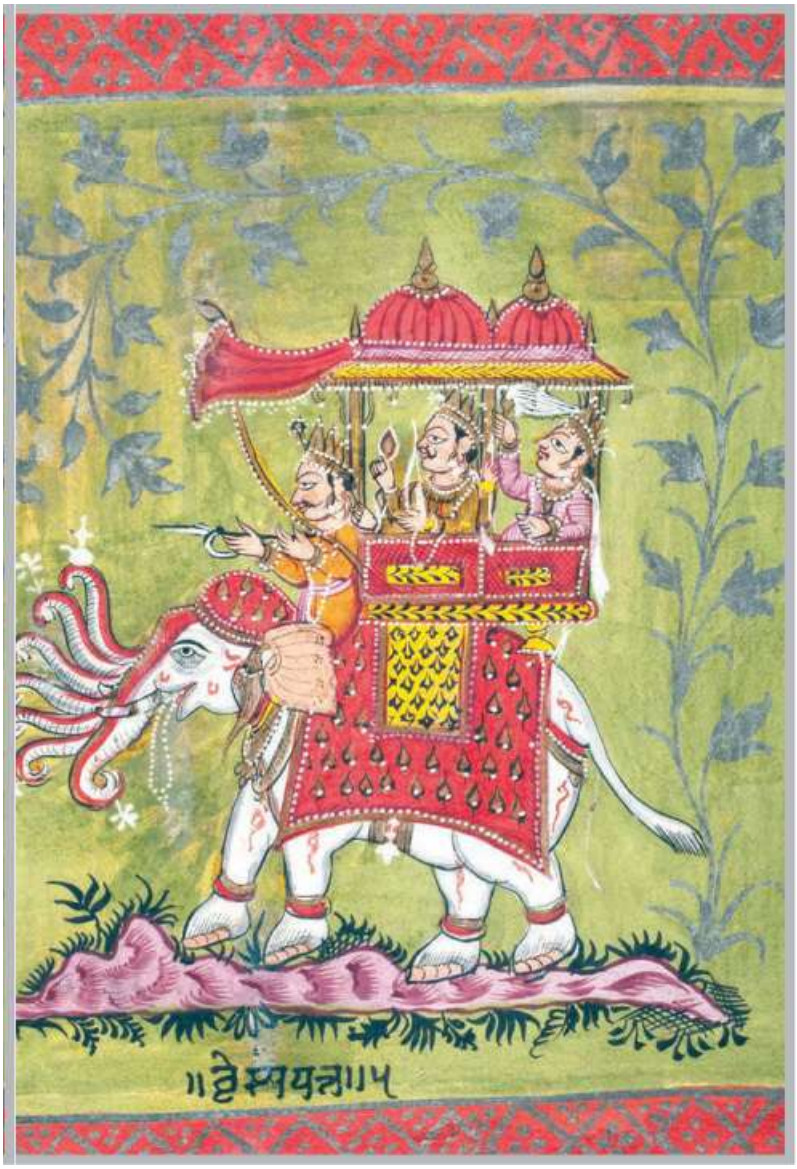
By the middle of the 1st millennium CE, an attempt to synthesize the diverging sectarian traditions is evident in the doctrine of Trimurti, which considers Vishnu, Shiva, and Brahma as three forms of the supreme unmanifested deity. By the 7th century, he had largely lost his claim to being a supreme deity, although the Trimurti continued to figure importantly in both text and sculpture. Today there is no cult or sect that exclusively worships Brahma, and few temples are dedicated to him. Nevertheless, all temples dedicated to Shiva or Vishnu must contain an image of Brahma.

Brahma is usually depicted as having four faces, symbolic of a wide-ranging four-square capacity, as expressed in the four Vedas (collections of poems and hymns), the four *yugas* ("ages"), the four *varnas* (social classes), the four directions, the four stages of orthoprax life, or life according to correct practice (*ashramas*), and so forth. He is usually shown with four arms, holding an alms bowl, a bow, prayer beads, and a book. He may be seated or standing on a lotus throne or on his mount, a goose. Savitri and Sarasvati, respectively exemplars of faithfulness and of music and learning, frequently accompany him.

The Hindu god Brahma can be recognized by his four faces. Many legends describe him as being born from a golden egg. Sarawut Sukasem/Shutterstock.com

BRIHASPATI

Brihaspati, in Vedic mythology, is the preceptor of the gods; the master of sacred wisdom, charms, hymns, and rites; and the sage counselor of Indra in his war against the titans, or *asuras*. As such, Brihaspati is the heavenly prototype of the caste of Brahmans and, most particularly, of the earthly *purohita*, or family priest. To him is attributed a hymn in the *Rigveda*. An ancient sage and a founder of a heretical sect also bear his name. He is the regent of the planet Jupiter.



The Hindu god Brihaspati is known as the guru of the gods, responsible for the offering of prayers and sacrifices to them. He is considered the personification of piety and religion. Los Angeles County Museum of Art (www.lacma.org), M.79.191.8

DHANVANTARI

Dhanvantari, also spelled Dhanwantari, is in Hindu mythology the physician of the gods. According to legend, the gods and the demons sought the elixir *amrita* by churning the milky ocean, and Dhanvantari rose out of the waters bearing a cup filled with the elixir. The Ayurveda, a traditional system of medicine, is also attributed to him. The name has also been applied to other semilegendary and historical physicians and to a legendary king.

A painted plaster statue depicts Dhanvantari, the Hindu god of medicine, physician to the gods, and avatar of Vishnu. Science & Society Picture Library/Getty Images

DURGA

Durga, in Hinduism, is a principal form of the goddess also known as Devi and also as Shakti. According to legend, Durga was created for the slaying of the buffalo demon Mahisasura, by Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, and the lesser gods who were otherwise powerless to overcome him. Embodying their collective energy (*shakti*), she is both derivative from the male divinities and the true source of their inner power. She is also greater than any of them. Born fully grown and beautiful, Durga presents a fierce menacing form to her enemies. She is usually depicted riding a lion and with 8 or 10 arms, each holding the special weapon of one of the gods, who gave them to her for her battle against the buffalo demon. The Durga-puja, held annually in her honor, is one of the great festivals of northeastern India.

The goddess Durga is depicted here riding a lion, which is a symbol of supreme power. Pramod Chandra

GANESHA

Ganesha, also spelled Ganesh, also called Ganapati, elephant-headed Hindu god of beginnings, is traditionally worshipped before any major enterprise and is the patron of intellectuals, bankers, scribes, and authors. He is also known as “Lord of the People” (*gana* means the common people) and as “Lord of the Ganas” (Ganesha is the chief of the *ganas*, the goblin hosts of Shiva). Ganesha is potbellied and generally depicted as holding in his hand a few round Indian sweets, of which he is inordinately fond. His vehicle (*vahana*) in the world is the large Indian bandicoot rat, which symbolizes Ganesha’s ability to overcome anything to get what he wants; Ganesha is thus the remover of obstacles.

Many different stories are told about the birth of Ganesha, including one in which Parvati makes her son out of a piece of cloth and asks her consort, Shiva, to bring him to life. One of the best-known myths, however, begins with Parvati taking a bath and longing for someone to keep Shiva from barging in on her, as was his habit. As she bathes, she kneads the dirt that she rubs off her body into the shape of a child, who comes to life. But when Shiva sees the handsome young boy—or when the inauspicious planet Saturn (Shani) glances at it, in some variants of the myth that attempt to absolve Shiva of the crime—he or one of his attendants cuts off the child’s head, which is eventually replaced with the head of an elephant. When Shiva cuts off the elephant’s head to bestow it on the headless Ganesha, one of the tusks is shattered, and Ganesha is depicted holding the broken-off piece in his hand. According to this version of the myth, Ganesha is the child of Parvati alone—indeed, a child born despite Shiva’s negative intervention.

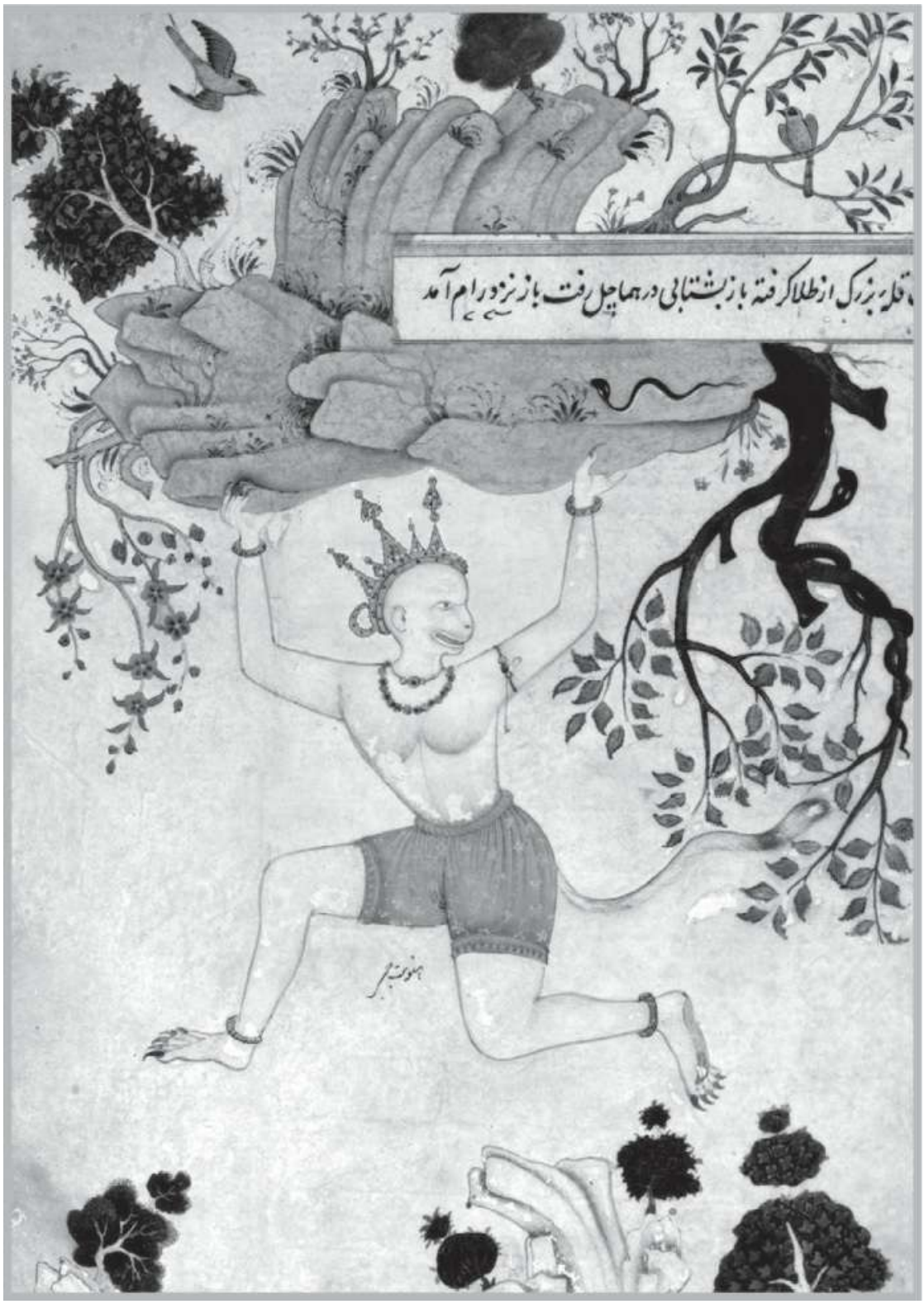
This statue is of the Hindu god Ganesha, who possesses the head of an elephant. Wittelsbach bernd/E+/Getty Images

HANUMAN

Hanuman, in Hindu mythology, is the monkey commander of the monkey army. His exploits are included in the great Hindu Sanskrit poem the *Ramayana* (“Romance of Rama”).

While still a baby, Hanuman, the child of a nymph by the wind god, tried to fly up and grab the sun, which he mistook for a fruit. Indra, the king of the gods, struck Hanuman with his thunderbolt on the jaw (*hanu*), thus inspiring the name. When Hanuman continued to misbehave, powerful sages cursed him to forget his magic powers, such as the ability to fly or to become infinitely large, until he was reminded of them. Hanuman led the monkeys to help the god Rama recover Rama’s wife, Sita, from the demon Rāvaṇa, king of Lanka (sometimes thought to be Sri Lanka). Having been reminded of his powers by Jambavan, the king of the bears, Hanuman crossed the strait between India and Lanka in one leap, despite the efforts of watery demonesses to stop him by swallowing him or his shadow. He was discovered in Lanka, and his tail was set on fire, but he used that fire to burn down Lanka. Hanuman also flew to the Himalayas and returned with a mountain full of medicinal herbs to restore the wounded in Rama’s army.

Hanuman is worshipped as a subsidiary figure in temples dedicated to Rama or directly in shrines dedicated to Hanuman himself. In temples throughout India, and specifically in striking South Indian bronze sculptures, he appears in the form of a monkey with a red face who stands erect like a human. For his service to Rama, Hanuman is upheld as a model for all human devotion (*bhakti*).



The Hindu god Hanuman is depicted here as a humanoid monkey. In this painting he is carrying a mountain of healing herbs. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution, Freer

Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Hanuman is also a popular deity in Tibet, Southeast Asia, Japan, and China, and throughout this area many temples are erected for his worship and districts of towns bear his name. Outside India, rather different tales are told of him. Although steadfastly chaste in the Sanskrit tradition, for instance, he has wives and children in other traditions. He has been identified as the inspiration for the monkey hero of the great Chinese poem *Xiyouji* (“Journey to the West”). In India, Hanuman is revered by the nationalist Hindu organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, and he has been depicted as a fierce superhero in a popular series of comic books. The Hanuman langur (*Semnopithecus entellus*), one of the most common Indian monkeys, is named after the *Ramayana* character.

HARIHARA

Harihara, also spelled Hari-hara, in Hinduism is a syncretic deity combining the two major gods Vishnu (Hari) and Shiva (Hara). Images of Harihara (also known as Shambhu-Vishnu and Shankara-Narayana, variants of the names of the two gods) first appeared in the classical period after sectarian movements, which elevated one god as supreme over the others, had waned sufficiently for efforts at compromise to be attempted. The dual form found special favor in Cambodia, where inscriptions and images in the 6th–7th century are known. In images of Harihara, the right half is depicted as Shiva and the left as Vishnu. The visage of the Shiva half is awesome, befitting his function as destroyer, and its hands hold the *trishula* (“trident”); the Vishnu side is “pacific,” appropriate to the preserver role of that deity, and its hands hold weapons characteristic of him. Half the headdress is shown with Shiva’s matted locks and half as Vishnu’s crown, and on the forehead half of Shiva’s third eye is visible. Many Hindus regard forms such as Harihara as aids in a process of spiritual growth whereby all representations of the divine are found to be partial and, if taken in isolation, misleading.

This temple is a shrine to Harihara, a deity that is a combination of the two major gods Vishnu and Shiva. © iStockphoto.com/TerryJLawrence

Harihara is the combined deity form of Vishnu and Shiva and, as such, is seen as a form of the supreme god. In this sculpture, the left half of the figure represents Vishnu, while the right half evokes Shiva. DEA/G. Dagli Orti/De Agostini/Getty Images

INDRA

Indra, in Hindu mythology, is the king of the gods. He is one of the main gods of the archaic Sanskrit collection of hymns, the *Rigveda*, and is the Indo-European cousin of the German Wotan, Norse Odin, Greek Zeus, and Roman Jupiter.

In early religious texts Indra plays a variety of roles. As king, he leads cattle raids against the *dasas* or *dasyus*, native inhabitants of the lands over which his people range. He brings rain as god of the thunderbolt, and he is the great warrior who conquers the antigods (*asuras*). He also defeats innumerable human and superhuman enemies, most famously Vritra, a dragon and a leader of the *dasa*. Vritra is accused in his dragon form of holding back the waters and the rains, as a *dasa* of stealing cows, and as an antigod of hiding the sun. Indra is strengthened for these feats by drinks of the elixir of immortality, the *soma*, which priests offer to him in the sacrifice. Among his allies are the Rudras (or Maruts), who ride the clouds and direct storms. Indra is sometimes referred to as “the thousand-eyed.”

In later Hinduism, Indra is no longer worshipped but plays the important mythological roles of god of rain, regent of the heavens, and guardian of the east. Later texts note this break in the worship of Indra. In the *Mahabharata*, the great Sanskrit epic, Indra fathers the great hero Arjuna and tries in vain to prevent the god of fire, Agni, from burning a great forest. In the Puranas, ancient collections of Hindu myths and legends, Krishna, the great god and avatar of Vishnu, persuades the cowherders of Gokula (or Vraja, modern Gokul) to stop their worship of Indra. Enraged, Indra sends down torrents of rain, but Krishna lifts Mount Govardhana on his fingertip and gives the people shelter under it for seven days until Indra relents and pays him homage.

The Hindu god Indra rides on his white elephant named Airavata. Indra is the god of rain and thunderstorms. He is holding lightning and thunderbolts in his hand. Archive Photos/Getty Images

In painting and sculpture, Indra is often depicted riding his white elephant, Airavata. Indra also plays a part in the Jain and Buddhist mythology of India. When Mahavira, the Jain savior and reformer, cut off his hair to signify his renunciation of the world, Indra, as king of the gods, received the hair into his hands. In Buddhist mythology, Indra is sometimes mocked and is sometimes portrayed as a mere figurehead.

JAGANNATHA

Jagannatha is a form under which the Hindu god Krishna is worshipped at Puri, Orissa, one of the most famous religious centres of India, and at Ballabhpur, a suburb of Shrirampur, West Bengal. The 12th-century temple of Jagannatha in Puri towers above the town. In its sanctuary, rough-hewn wooden images represent Jagannatha, his brother Balabhadra (Balarama), and his sister Subhadra. Some scholars suggest Buddhist influence in the threefold nature of the temple image. Modern representations made in Puri of the 10 avatars (incarnations) of Vishnu often show Jagannatha as one of the 10 in place of the more usually accepted Buddha.

The most important of the numerous yearly festivals is the Chariot Festival (Rathayatra), which takes place on the second day of the bright fortnight of Ashadha (June–July). The image is placed in a wagon so heavy that the efforts of hundreds of devotees are required to move it, and it is dragged through deep sand to the country house of the god. The journey takes several days, and thousands of pilgrims participate. Reports of these processions in the past have been much exaggerated, although accidents are common and occasionally a frenzied pilgrim attempts to throw himself under the wagon. The English word “juggernaut,” with its connotation of a force crushing whatever is in its path, is derived from this festival.

KALI

Kali, in Hinduism, is the goddess of time, doomsday, and death, or the black goddess (the feminine form of Sanskrit *kala*, “time-doomsday-death,” or “black”). Kali’s iconography, cult, and mythology commonly associate her with death, sexuality, violence, and, paradoxically in some later traditions, with motherly love. Although depicted in many forms throughout South Asia (and now much of the world), Kali is most often characterized as black or blue, partially or completely naked, with a long lolling tongue, multiple arms, a skirt or girdle of human arms, a necklace of decapitated heads, and a decapitated head in one of her hands. She is often portrayed standing or dancing on her husband, the god Shiva, who lies prostrate beneath her.

A precursor of Kali is the demoness Long Tongue, who licks up oblations in the ancient Sanskrit texts known as the Brahmanas. Kali’s origins can also be traced to the deities of the village, tribal, and mountain cultures of South Asia who were gradually appropriated and transformed, if never quite tamed, by the Sanskritic traditions. She makes her first major appearance in Sanskrit culture in the *Devi-mahatmya* (“The Glorifications of the Goddess,” *c*. 6th century CE), where she springs from the anger of the goddess Durga to slay the demon Raktabija (“Blood-Seed”). During the struggle a new demon emerges from each drop of Raktabija’s blood as it hits the ground; to prevent this, Kali laps up the blood before it can reach the ground. She is also said to have been born when the goddess Parvati shed her dark skin; the sheath became Kali—who is also called Kaushika, “The Sheath”—leaving Parvati in the form of Gauri (“The Fair One”).

The many-armed goddess Kali dances on the body of her husband, Shiva. Many see her as a symbol of female empowerment. Werner Forman/Universal Images Group/Getty Images

Worshipped throughout India but particularly in Kashmir, Kerala, South India, Bengal, and Assam, Kali is both geographically and culturally marginal. Since the late 20th century, feminist scholars and writers in the United States have seen Kali as a symbol of feminine empowerment, while members of New Age movements have found theologically and sexually liberating inspiration in her more violent sexual manifestations.

KAMA

Kama, in the mythology of India, is the god of love. During the Vedic age (2nd millennium–7th century BCE), he personified cosmic desire, or the creative impulse, and was called the firstborn of the primeval Chaos that makes all creation possible. In later periods he is depicted as a handsome youth, attended by heavenly nymphs, who shoots love-producing flower-arrows. His bow is of sugarcane, his bowstring a row of bees. Once directed by the other gods to arouse Shiva's passion for Parvati, he disturbed the great god's meditation on a mountaintop. Enraged, Shiva burned him to ashes with the fire of his third eye. Thus, he became Ananga (Sanskrit: "the Bodiless"). Some accounts say Shiva soon relented and restored him to life after the entreaties of Kama's wife, Rati. Others hold that Kama's subtle bodiless form renders him even more deftly omnipresent than he would be if constrained by bodily limitation.

This painting of Kama is from the mid-17th century. Kama is the god of love, representing passion. The Kama-sutra *was named for him.* Pramod Chandra

The Sanskrit term *kama* also refers to one of the four proper aims of human life—pleasure and love. A classic textbook on erotic love and human pleasure, the *Kama-sutra* (5th century CE), is attributed to the sage Vatsyayana.

KUBERA

Kubera, in Hindu mythology, is the king of the *yaksha* (nature spirits) and the god of wealth. He is associated with the earth, mountains, all treasures such as minerals and jewels that lie underground, and riches in general. According to most accounts he first lived in Lanka (Sri Lanka), but his palace was taken away from him by his half brother, Rāvaṇa, and he now resides in a beautiful mountain residence near Śiva's home on Mount Kailāsa, where he is attended by all manner of genies.

Kubera is the guardian of the north and is usually depicted as a dwarfish figure with a large paunch, holding a money bag or a pomegranate, sometimes riding on a man. Also known as Vaiśrāvaṇa and Jambhala, he is a popular figure in Buddhist and Jaina mythology as well. In Buddhist sculptures he is often shown accompanied by a mongoose.

An ancient sculpture housed in a North Korean temple depicts Kubera, the lord of wealth and protector of the world. iStock/Thinkstock

LAKSHMI

Lakshmi, also spelled Lakṣmī, also called Shri, is the Hindu goddess of wealth and good fortune. The wife of Vishnu, she is said to have taken different forms in order to be with him in each of his incarnations. Thus when he was the dwarf Vamana, she appeared from a lotus and was known as Padma, or Kamala; when he was the ax-wielding Parashurama, the destroyer of the warrior caste, she was his wife Dharani; when he was King Rama, she was his queen Sita. In the most widely received account of Lakshmi's birth, she rose from the churning of the ocean of milk (an important event in Hinduism), seated on a lotus and holding another blossom in her hand. Controversy arose between the gods and demons over possession of her.

Lakshmi is often represented in sculpture seated on a lotus, full-breasted, broad-hipped, beneficently smiling, and sometimes being anointed by a pair of elephants. Her vehicle is the white owl. She continues to be worshipped by modern Hindus, particularly in the home (every Friday) and on regular festival days throughout the year. She is greatly revered by members of the Jainist faith.

Lakshmi is the Hindu goddess of wealth and good fortune. She is often depicted with owls or with lotus blossoms, like the ones at her feet. British Library/Robana/Hulton Fine Art Collection/Getty Images

MANASĀ

Manasā, folk goddess of snakes, is worshipped mainly in Bengal and other parts of northeastern India, chiefly for the prevention and cure of snakebite and also for fertility and general prosperity. As the protector of children, she is often identified with the goddess Ṣaṣṭhī (“the Sixth,” worshipped on the sixth day after birth). The antiquity of the goddess is a matter of conjecture. The written texts that contain her myth, the *Manasā-maṅgals*, date from the 16th–17th century but are probably based on an earlier oral tradition. She is also celebrated in a variety of folk entertainment in the villages. Manasā is apparently a local goddess who was incorporated into the classical Hindu pantheon. She may be related to the *nagas*, a legendary half-human, half-serpent race in India.

Manasā, the goddess of snakes, is represented in this carving. She is worshipped for prevention and cure of snakebites, but also for fertility. G. Nimatallah/De Agostini/Getty Images

MITRA

Mitra, in the pantheon of Vedic Hinduism, is one of the gods in the category of Adityas, or sovereign principles of the universe. He represents friendship, integrity, harmony, and all else that is important in the successful maintenance of order in human existence. He is usually paired with the god Varuna, the guardian of the cosmic order, whose powers he complements as guardian of the human order. As spirit of the day he is sometimes attributed with solar characteristics. His Iranian counterpart is Mithra, who eventually came to be worshipped as the god of one of the great mystery cults, Mithraism.

MURUGAṈ

Muruga̲n̲, is the chief deity of the ancient Tamils of South India, later identified in part with the Hindu god Skanda. He probably originated as a fertility god, and his worship is said to have included orgiastic dancing. He is described as joining his fierce mother, Ko̲r̲r̲avai, in cannibal feasts on the battlefield, a practice that authorities use to explain his association with the North Indian war god Skanda. His favorite weapon was the trident or spear, and his banner carried the emblem of a wild fowl. The *Tirumurukārruppatai*, a “guide to the worship of the god Muruga̲n̲,” is a description of the chief shrines of the god that the worshipper is encouraged to visit; it was probably written prior to the 7th century CE.

A statue of Murugaṉ welcomes visitors to the Batu Caves in Malaysia. Murugaṉ is the god of war and victory and commander of the gods. As the son of Shiva and Parvati and the brother of Ganesh, he has illustrious family ties. Kevin Clogstoun/Lonely Planet Images/Getty Images

NANDI

Nandi is the bull *vahana* ("mount") of the Hindu god Shiva. Some scholars suggest that the bull was originally the zoomorphic form of Shiva, but from the Kushan dynasty onward (*c*. 1st century CE) he is identified as the god's vehicle.

This statue of Nandi, the bull upon which Shiva rides, was built in 1659. Nandi is often depicted as a white bull as well. Aleksandar Todorovic/Shutterstock.com

Every Shaivite temple has the figure of a white, humped bull reclining on a raised

platform and facing the entrance door of the shrine so that, according to tradition, he may perpetually gaze on the lord in his symbolic form, the lingam. Nandi is considered to be one of Shiva's chief attendants and occasionally is depicted in sculpture as a bull-faced dwarf figure. Nandi is also known in a wholly anthropomorphic form, called variously Nandikeshvara or Adhikaranandin. Sculptures of him in human form, found at the entrance door of many Shaivite temples in South India, are frequently confused with images of the deity because they are alike in such iconographic features as the third eye, crescent moon in the matted locks, and four arms, two of which hold the battle-ax and an antelope. Usually a distinguishing feature is that Nandi's hands are pressed together in adoration. The respect shown the bull in modern India is due to his association with Shiva. In sacred Hindu cities such as Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh state, certain bulls are given the freedom to roam the streets. They are considered to belong to the lord, and they are branded on the flank with the trident insignia of Shiva.

PRAJAPATI

Prajapati is one of the creator figures of the Vedic period of ancient India; in the post-Vedic age he came to be identified with a major Hindu god, Brahma, who gradually surpassed him in importance.

The frequent speculations on the creation of the world in the early Vedic literature allude to various primal figures, such as Hiranyagarbha (“Golden Egg”) and Vishvakarman (“All-Accomplishing”), and the title of Prajapati was applied to more than one such figure. Later it was used to signify one deity, the lord of all creatures. According to one of the stories of creation, Prajapati produced the universe and all its beings after first preparing himself by undergoing *tapas* (ascetic practices); other stories allude to his own creation from the primal waters. His female emanation, who aided him in the creation of other beings, was Vac, the personification of the sacred word, but sometimes his female partner is given as Ushas, the dawn, who is also regarded as his daughter.

Collectively, the Prajapati are the “mind born” children of Brahma. They are generally considered to number 10, though some authorities reduce them to seven and relate them to the seven great *rishis* (ancient sages).

RADHA

Radha, in Hinduism, is the *gopi* (milkmaid) who became the consort of the god Krishna during that period of his life when he lived among the *gopas* (cowherds) of Vrindavana. Radha was the wife of another *gopa* but was the most beloved of Krishna's consorts and his constant companion. In the *bhakti* (devotional) movement of Vaishnavism, the female, Radha, symbolizes the human soul and the male, Krishna, the divine.

Radha (center right) *is almost always depicted alongside Krishna* (center left), *although she was not his wife, just a constant companion.* Atma

The allegorical love of Radha has been given expression in the lyrical poetry of many Indian languages. In Bengal, many poets composed such poetry, including the supremely lyrical *Govinda Das*. The Bengali saint Chaitanya was said to be an incarnation of the two lovers; he was Krishna on the inside and Radha on the outside. Chaitanya also composed many lyrics celebrating the divine love, which have not survived. The *Gita Govinda* by Jayadeva was a favorite source of inspiration for the later Rajasthani and Pahari miniature painters, in whose works Radha is seen waiting for Krishna to return with the cows in the twilight or sitting with him in a forest grove engaged in amorous play. The bronze images of Krishna playing the flute that are enshrined in temples are often accompanied, particularly in the northern and eastern parts of India, by images of his beloved Radha, and she is also worshipped.

SAPTAMATRIKA

Saptamatrika, in Hinduism, is a group of seven mother-goddesses, each of whom is the *shakti*, or female counterpart, of a god. They are Brahmani, Maheshvari, Kaumari, Vaishnavi, Varahi, Indrani, and Chamunda, or Yami. (One text, the *Varaha-Purana*, states that they number eight, including Yogeshvari, created out of the flame from Shiva's mouth.)

Representations of the goddesses are found in shrines throughout India, frequently flanked by Virabhadra (a ferocious form of Lord Shiva) on the left and the elephant-headed Ganesha on the right. The individual mothers can be identified by their weapons, ornaments, *vahanas* ("mounts"), and banner emblems, which are in each case the same as that of their corresponding male deities. Groups devoted to the Saptamatrika may have existed before the 11th century; perhaps, as some scholars suggest, these were absorbed by the growing worship of Shakti (the divine creative energy personified as female).

SARASVATI

Sarasvati, is the Hindu goddess of learning and the arts, especially music. First appearing as the personification of the sacred river Sarasvati and also identified with Vac, the goddess of speech, she is later named the consort, daughter, or granddaughter of the god Brahma. She is regarded as the patroness of art, music, and letters and as the inventor of the Sanskrit language. She is usually represented as riding on a goose of pure white that is able to undertake long flights and holding a lute and a manuscript or book. In modern times her mount has frequently been represented as a swan. Sarasvati is worshipped at the advent of spring (January–February), when her image is taken out in jubilant procession, but she is also invoked perennially and at examination times by students and by artists and performers of all kinds. Sarasvati is also popular in Jain and Buddhist mythology.

A Hindu woman performs a traditional Hindu prayer at the tri-veni, *the confluence of the three most sacred rivers in India—the Ganges, the Yamuna, and the mythic river Sarasvati. The goddess Sarasvati was originally a personification of the latter river, which may or may not have once existed but was mentioned in ancient Sanskrit texts.* Alberto Buzzola/LightRocket/Getty Images

This sculpture depicts the Hindu goddess Sarasvati, goddess of learning and of music. She is often represented alongside water, symbolizing the flow of knowledge. Godong/Universal Images Group/Getty Images

The river Sarasvati is revered above all others in the Vedas (a collection of poems and hymns) and is by far the one most frequently mentioned. Because it corresponds to none of the major rivers of present-day South Asia, it has for centuries been regarded as subtle or mythic, converging unseen with the Ganges and Jamuna rivers when they flow together at Prayag (Allahabad). The millions of pilgrims who participate in the great religious festival Kumbh Mela every 12 years at this site are thus said to bathe in the *tri-veni* (“triple confluence”), as do all pilgrims to Prayag, which is therefore sometimes called “king of *tirthas* (sacred places).”

A major debate at the beginning of the 21st century focused on whether the Vedic Sarasvati corresponds to a major dry riverbed forming part of the Indus complex and containing many unexcavated archaeological sites. If so, this forgotten Sarasvati might provide a major link between Vedic and Indus Valley cultures.

SATI

Sati, Sanskrit Satī (“Virtuous Woman”), is one of the wives of the god Shiva and a daughter of the sage Daksa. Sati married Shiva against her father’s wishes. When her father failed to invite her husband to a great sacrifice, Sati died of mortification and was later reborn as the goddess Parvati. (Some accounts say she threw herself into the sacrificial fire, an act that is sometimes given as justification for suttee, the ritual immolation of a wife on her husband’s funeral pyre.) Shiva, distraught, carried her corpse around the world on his shoulder until the other gods dismembered it to put an end to his mourning. Each of the spots where a piece of Sati’s body fell to the ground became a sacred place of pilgrimage called a *pitha*.

Sati was Shiva’s first wife. Sati is also the name of the act of a Hindu wife throwing herself on her husband’s funeral pyre. Dorling Kindersley/Getty Images

SAVITRI

Savitri, a goddess in Hindu mythology, is the daughter of the solar deity Savitr and the wife of the creator god Brahma. The more common use of the term *savitri* is to designate one of the most important mantras in Hinduism, taken from the *gayatri*, a verse in the *Rigveda*: “We contemplate the excellent glory of the divine Savitr; may he inspire our intellect.”

This mantra is employed in several ritual contexts, the most important of which is the initiation ceremony (*upanayana*) traditionally incumbent upon boys of all the “twice-born” castes (i.e., excluding Shudras and untouchables). Depending on the class or caste of the young initiate, the verse would be recited in different metres; this was done at the instruction of the teacher or guru after the imparting of the sacred thread, the symbol of the “second birth.” The Savitri verse inaugurated the period of study of the Veda under the guidance of this teacher and was meant to inspire the boy to success in his endeavor.

Another principal ritual context in which this mantra is featured is the morning prayer, or *samdhya*, that forms a part of the daily religious practice of millions of Hindus. Some scriptures recommend that this verse be repeated several times during the course of this ceremony and that the recitation be drawn out as long as possible, for it is through this prolonged recitation that the ancestors supposedly attained long life, understanding, honor, and glory.

This painting of the goddess Savitri depicts the famous tale of her saving her husband from the god of death. Ashmolean Museum / The Art Archive at Art Resource, NY

SHAKTI

Shaktism is the worship of the Hindu supreme goddess, Shakti (Sanskrit: "Power," or "Energy"). Shaktism is, together with Vaishnavism and Shaivism, one of the major forms of modern Hinduism and is especially popular in Bengal and Assam. Shakti is conceived of either as the paramount goddess or as the consort of a male deity, generally Shiva.

People of spiritual disposition worship Shakti as the divine will, the divine mother who calls for absolute surrender. Yogis consider Shakti as the power, lying dormant within the body as a coiled serpent (*kundalini*), that must be aroused and realized to reach spiritual liberation. Shaktism is inseparably related to Tantra Hinduism, a system of practices for the purification of both mind and body.

In popular worship the goddess Shakti is known by many names; some authorities consider most female deities in Hinduism to be her different manifestations. She may be referred to simply as Devi (goddess). In her beneficent aspect she is known variously as Uma, Parvati, and Ambika. In her fierce, destructive aspect she is represented as the black Kali, the demondestroying Durga, and the goddess of smallpox, Shitala. The goddess is also worshiped as the gracious Lakshmi, who is the consort of Vishnu.

CHANDI

Chandi, also called Chandika, is the demon-destroying form of the Hindu goddess Shakti, particularly popular in eastern India. She is known by various names, such as Mahamaya, or Abhaya (Sanskrit: "She Who Is Without Fear"), and appears to be a composite of folk beliefs with the higher traditions. Her representation is similar to that of Durga, another form of Shakti. She is shown with either 8 or 10 arms, seated on a lion vehicle. Hundreds of folktales and songs tell of her exploits. She is the central figure of an extensive Middle Bengali literature known as *Chandi-mangal*, the most famous of which is that of Mukundarama Chakravarti (*c*. 16th century).

This watercolor depiction of the Goddess Chandi does not feature certain characteristics often associated with her, such as multiple arms. According to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, however, the goddess is often depicted seated on a lotus with an elephant. This may represent a merging of Chandi's identity with that of the goddess Parvati, who often cradles her elephant-headed son Ganesha. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Pennsylvania, PA/Bequest of Mrs. Maurice J. Speiser in memory of Raymond A. Speiser, 1968 / The Bridgeman Art Library

SHASHTHI

Shashthi, Sanskrit Ṣaṣṭhī, is a folk deity who is the goddess of vegetation, reproduction, and infant welfare. Shashthi is especially venerated in eastern India, largely in Bengal and Orissa. The name “Shashthi” means “the sixth” and is derived from the name of the sixth day of the lunar fortnight. On the sixth day after the birth of a child, worship is ordinarily offered to Shashthi in her role as custodian of infant welfare. In Bengal a minor subclass of the literary genre known as *maṅgal-kavya* is devoted to works celebrating her exploits and majesty; these works are known as the *Shashthi-maṅgal*.

SHIVA

Shiva, also spelled Śiwa or Śiva, is one of the main deities of Hinduism, whom Shaivas worship as the supreme god. Among his common epithets are Shambhu ("Benign"), Shankara ("Beneficent"), Mahesha ("Great Lord"), and Mahadeva ("Great God").

Shiva is represented in a variety of forms: in a pacific mood with his consort Parvati and son Skanda, as the cosmic dancer (Nataraja), as a naked ascetic, as a mendicant beggar, as a yogi, and as the androgynous union of Shiva and his consort in one body, half-male and half-female (Ardhanarishvara). As Bhairava, he is often depicted as a Dalit (formerly called an untouchable) and accompanied by a dog. He is both the great ascetic and the master of fertility, and he is the master of both poison and medicine, through his ambivalent power over snakes. As Lord of Beasts (Pashupati), he is the benevolent herdsman—or, at times, the merciless slaughterer of the "beasts" that are the human souls in his care. Although some of the combinations of roles may be explained by Shiva's identification with earlier mythological figures, they arise primarily from a tendency in Hinduism to see complementary qualities in a single ambiguous figure.

Shiva's female consort is known under various manifestations as Uma, Sati, Parvati, Durga, and Kali; Shiva is also sometimes paired with Shakti, the embodiment of power. The divine couple, together with their sons—Skanda and the elephant-headed Ganesha—are said to dwell on Mount Kailasa in the Himalayas. The six-headed Skanda is said to have been born of Shiva's seed, which was shed in the mouth of the god of fire, Agni, and transferred first to the river Ganges and then to six of the stars in the constellation of the Pleiades. According to another well-known myth, Ganesha was born when Parvati created him out of the dirt she rubbed off during a bath, and he received his elephant head from Shiva, who was responsible for beheading him. Shiva's vehicle in the world, his *vahana*, is the bull Nandi; a sculpture of Nandi sits opposite the main sanctuary of many Shiva temples. In temples and in private shrines, Shiva is also worshipped in the form of the lingam, a cylindrical votary object that is often embedded in a yoni, or spouted dish. Together they symbolize the eternal process of creation and regeneration. Since the late 19th century some scholars have interpreted the lingam and yoni as being aniconic representations of the male and female sexual organs, respectively.

This statue of Shiva is located in Thailand. OlegD/Shutterstock.com

Shiva is usually depicted in painting and sculpture as white (from the ashes of corpses that are smeared on his body) with a blue neck (from holding in his throat the poison that emerged at the churning of the cosmic ocean, which threatened to destroy the world), his hair arranged in a coil of matted locks (*jatamakuta*) and adorned with the crescent moon and the Ganges (according to legend, he brought the Ganges River to earth from the sky, where she is the Milky Way, by allowing the river to trickle through his hair, thus breaking her fall). Shiva has three eyes, the third eye bestowing inward vision but capable of burning destruction when focused outward. He wears a garland of skulls and a serpent around his neck and carries in his two (sometimes four) hands a deerskin, a trident, a small hand drum, or a club with a skull at the end. This skull identifies Shiva as a Kapalika (“Skull-Bearer”) and refers to a time when he cut off the fifth head of Brahma. The head stuck to his hand until he reached Varanasi (now in Uttar Pradesh, India), a city sacred to Shiva. It then fell away, and a shrine for the cleansing of all sins was later established in the place where it landed.

In the most common type of image, Shiva is shown with four arms and flying

locks dancing on the figure of a dwarf, Apasmara (a symbol of human ignorance; *apasmara* means “forgetfulness,” or “heedlessness”). Shiva’s back right hand holds the *damaru* (hourglass-shaped drum); the front right hand is in the *abhaya-mudra* (the “fear-not” gesture, made by holding the palm outward with fingers pointing up); the back left hand carries Agni (fire) in a vessel or in the palm of the hand; and the front left hand is held across his chest in the *gajahasta* (elephant-trunk) pose, with wrist limp and fingers pointed downward toward the uplifted left foot. The locks of Shiva’s hair stand out in several strands interspersed with the figures of Ganga (the Ganges River personified as a goddess), flowers, a skull, and the crescent moon. His figure is encircled by a ring of flames, the *prabhamandala*. In classic Sanskrit treatises on dance, this form, the most common representation of Nataraja, is called the *bhujamgatrasa* (“trembling of the snake”).

In the Nataraja sculpture, Shiva is shown as the source of all movement within the cosmos, represented by the arch of flames. The purpose of the dance is to release humans from illusion, and the place where it is said to have been performed, Chidambaram (an important Shaiva centre in South India), called the centre of the universe, is in reality within the heart. The gestures of the dance represent Shiva’s five activities (*pancakritya*): creation (symbolized by the drum), protection (by the “fear-not” pose of the hand), destruction (by the fire), embodiment (by the foot planted on the ground), and release (by the foot held aloft).

Other dances of Shiva seen in sculpture and painting are the wild *tandava*, which he performs on cremation grounds in the company of his consort Devi, and the evening dance performed on Mount Kailasa before the assembly of gods, some of whom accompany him on various instruments.

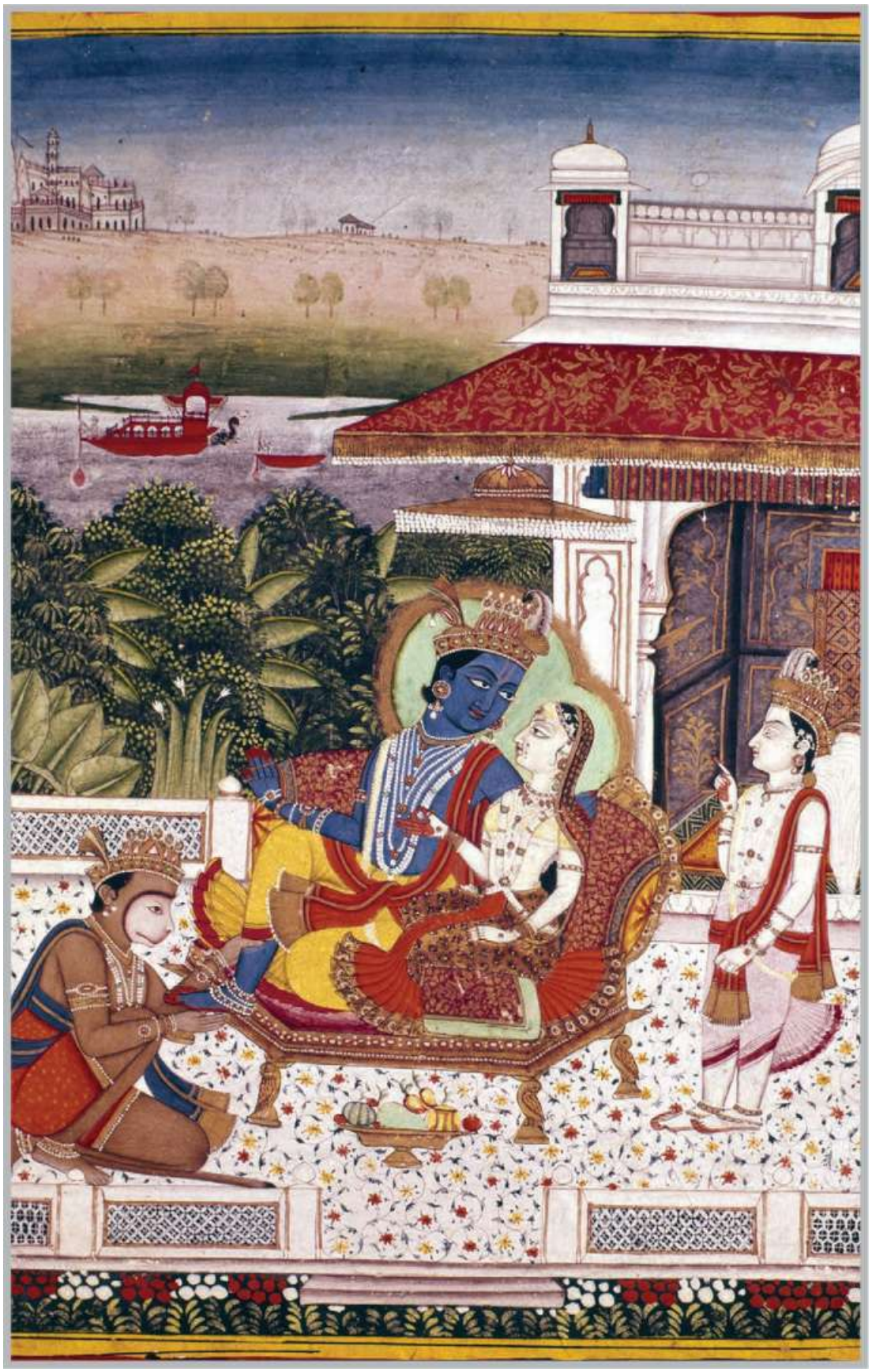
RUDRA

Shiva is considered to have evolved from Rudra, and the two share a fierce, unpredictable, destructive nature. In the Vedas, Rudra is known as the divine archer, who shoots arrows of death and disease and who has to be implored not to slay or injure in his wrath. As a healer and a source of 1,000 remedies, he also has a beneficent aspect. He is also the father of the storm gods, the Rudras, sometimes called Maruts.

SITA

Sita, also called Janaki is the consort of the god Rama and the embodiment of wifely devotion and self-surrender. Her abduction by the demon king Rāvaṇa and subsequent rescue are the central incidents in the great Hindu epic *Ramayana* (“Romance of Rama”). Sita was raised by King Janaka; she was not his natural daughter but sprang from a furrow when he was plowing his field. Rama won her as his bride by bending Shiva’s bow, and she accompanied her husband when he went into exile. Though carried away to Lanka by Rāvaṇa, she kept herself chaste by concentrating her heart on Rama throughout her long imprisonment. On her return she asserted her purity and also proved it by voluntarily undergoing an ordeal by fire. Rama, however, banished her to the forest in deference to public opinion. There she gave birth to their two children, Kusha and Lava. After they reached maturity and were acknowledged by Rama to be his sons, she called upon her mother, Earth, to swallow her up.

Sita is worshipped as the incarnation of Lakshmi, the consort of Vishnu. She is frequently depicted in Indian miniature paintings of the *Ramayana*, and her images in bronze are among the finest achievements of South Indian art. These usually form a group, with images of Rama, his brother Lakshmana, and his devotee, the monkey Hanuman; the iconographic texts instruct the artist to show Sita looking at her husband with supreme happiness.



Sita, seated on the right, is depicted here with her husband, Rama. Hanuman is shown kneeling at their feet. Sita is the embodiment of love and devotion to one's husband. Photos.com/Thinkstock

SKANDA

Skanda, also called Kārttikeya, Kumāra, or Subrahmaṇya, is the Hindu god of war and the first-born son of Siva. The many legends giving the circumstances of his birth are often at variance with one another. One account is given by Kālidāsa (4th and 5th centuries CE) in his epic poem *Kumārasaṃbhava* (“The Birth of the War God”). The versions all generally agree that the gods wished for Skanda to be born in order to destroy the demon Tāraka, who had been granted a boon that he could only be killed by a son of Śiva. Śiva, however, was lost in meditation and was not attracted to Parvati until struck by an arrow from the bow of Kama, the god of love. After the many years of abstinence Śiva’s seed was so strong that the gods feared the result, and some accounts say it was deposited into the fire (from which comes the name Skanda, in Sanskrit: “Spurt of Semen”).

The god Skanda (far right) *is often portrayed as having many heads, carrying a spear and arrows, or riding a peacock.* Steve Vidler/SuperStock

One tradition has it that Skanda was reared by, or was even the son of, the Kṛttikās, six wives of ṛṣis who as stars make up the Pleiades, hence the name Kārttikeya (“Son of Kṛttikās”). He developed his six faces to drink the milk of his six nurses. His relationship with Parvati is also acknowledged, and he is often depicted in painting and sculpture as a six-headed child held by his mother, Parvati, and accompanied by his brother Gaṇeśa. He is called Kumāra (Sankskrit: “Youth,” “Boy”) because he is generally considered to have never married and in Yoga represents the power of chastity. He has enormous strength and leads the army of the gods. When he planted his spear in the earth, none could budge it save the god Vishnu, and then mountains and rivers shook.

In South India, where the god originated as Murugaṉ before merging with the North Indian Skanda, he has a large following under the name Subrahmaṇya (“dear to the Brāhmaṇas”); his temples or shrines are found in every village, no matter how small.

Skanda is often represented in sculpture with either six heads or one, holding a spear or bow and arrows, and either riding on or accompanied by his mount, the peacock.

SURYA

Surya, in Hinduism, is both the sun and the sun god. Although in the Vedic period (2nd millennium–7th century BCE) several other deities also possessed solar characteristics, most of these were merged into a single god in later Hinduism. Surya was once ranked along with Vishnu, Shiva, Shakti, and Ganesha, and many temples dedicated to him are found throughout India. These five deities are worshipped by a very important group of Brahmans (priests), the Smartas, but Surya is worshipped as the supreme deity by only a small group, the Saura sect. He is, however, invoked by most Hindus, and the Gayatri mantra, uttered daily at dawn by many Hindus, is addressed to the sun.

Surya is the mythological father of many notable sons, including Manu (progenitor of the human race), Yama (lord of death), the Ashvins (twin physicians to the gods), Karna (a great warrior of the sacred epic the *Mahabharata*), and Sugriva (king of the monkeys). The Puranas (collections of myths and legends) record that the weapons of the gods were forged from pieces trimmed from Surya, whose full emanation was too bright to bear. His power was conceived of as dispelling darkness, curing disease, and heating and illuminating the world. His wife, Usas—in some accounts, his mother or mistress—is the personification of dawn.

Sculptures of Surya often show him in “northern” or Scythian dress—close-fitting coat and high boots—suggesting an influence from Iranian sun cults. He is commonly represented in a chariot drawn by seven horses or by a single horse with seven heads, holding full-blown lotuses, his head surrounded by a nimbus or by rays. One of the most splendid temples dedicated to Surya is the 13th-century Surya Deul (“Sun Temple”), once called the Black Pagoda, at Konarak, in Orissa. There the whole structure is conceived as a chariot on wheels in which the sun god rides across the heavens pulled by prancing horses.

This stone statue of Surya dates back to the 9th century. Surya is the god of the sun. He is often depicted driving a horse-drawn chariot. Pramod Chandra

VISHVAKARMAN

Vishvakarman, in Hindu mythology, is the architect of the gods. The name was originally used as an epithet of any powerful god but later came to personify creative power. Vishvakarman is the divine carpenter and master craftsman who fashioned the weapons of the gods and built their cities and chariots. He is the architect of the mythical city Lanka and is also said to have made the great image of Jagannatha at Puri (Orissa). He revealed the sciences of architecture and mechanics to humans and is the patron deity of workers, artisans, and artists.

Vishvakarman is the god of craftsmen and architects. Indeed, he is considered the divine draftsman of the entire universe and the builder of the gods' palaces. He built a golden palace on an island for Shiva known as Lanka. The demon king Rāvaṇa tricked Shiva out of this palace, but he in turn was killed by Lord Rama. Rama's battle to seize control of the island fortress of Lanka, associated with present-day Sri Lanka, is depicted in this bas relief. MyLoupe/Universal Images Group/Getty Images

YAMA

Yama, in the mythology of India, is the lord of death. The Vedas describe him as the first man who died, blazing the path of mortality down which all humans have since followed. He is the guardian of the south (the region of death) and presides over the resting place of the dead, which is located in the south under the earth. In the Vedas Yama was represented as a cheerful king of the departed ancestors, not as a punisher of sins, but in later mythology he became known as the just judge (Dharmaraja) who weighs the good and evil deeds of the dead and determines their retribution. He is described as majestic in appearance, green, with red eyes and red garments. He carries a mace, which may be ornamented with a skull, and a noose and rides a buffalo. His two four-eyed dogs guard the entrance to his kingdom, and the crow and the pigeon act as his messengers. Yama has also passed over into Buddhist mythology in Tibet, China, and Japan, where he occupies a similar but minor role as the guardian of the abode of the dead.

*

GLOSSARY

ambiguous Having more than one meaning.

androgynous Having both male and female characteristics.

anthropomorphic Defined by having human characteristics.

archaeology The study of human activity through the recovery and study of artifacts.

avatar The human or animal form of a Hindu god.

caste a social system that divides society based on wealth, rank, profession, or race

consort An associate or companion.

cult A small religious group that is not part of a larger and more accepted religion and that has beliefs regarded by many people as extreme or dangerous.

deity A god or goddess.

dharma A Hindu individual's duty fulfilled by observance of custom or law.

divine Relating to a god or goddess.

duality The quality of having two opposing parts.

gopi A girl cow herder.

immortality The ability to live forever.

incarnation One of the series of lives that a person is believed to have had in the past according to Hinduism.

indigenous Originating in a particular place.

lotus Any of various water lilies, which are often represented in Hindu art and religious symbolism.

lyrics The words of a song.

manifestation An object that embodies a theory or idea.

monotheistic Pertaining to the belief in one god.

mortification Exercising restraint against bodily passions or appetites.

mythology The stories and legends created to explain a religious belief.

nomadic Roaming about from place to place aimlessly, frequently, or without a fixed pattern of movement.

personification The application of human characteristics to an object or other non-human entity.

pilgrimage A journey to a holy place.

reborn Born again, often in a different form.

retribution The dispensing or receiving of a reward or punishment, especially during the afterlife.

sacrifice An act of offering to a deity something precious.

steppe A large, flat, grassy area with very few trees

sublimity Posessing the quality of spiritual greatness.

theism The belief in the existence of at least one deity.

transcendent Beyond the range of normal or physical human experience.

trident A spear with three prongs

vernacular The language spoken by the ordinary people in a country or region.

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